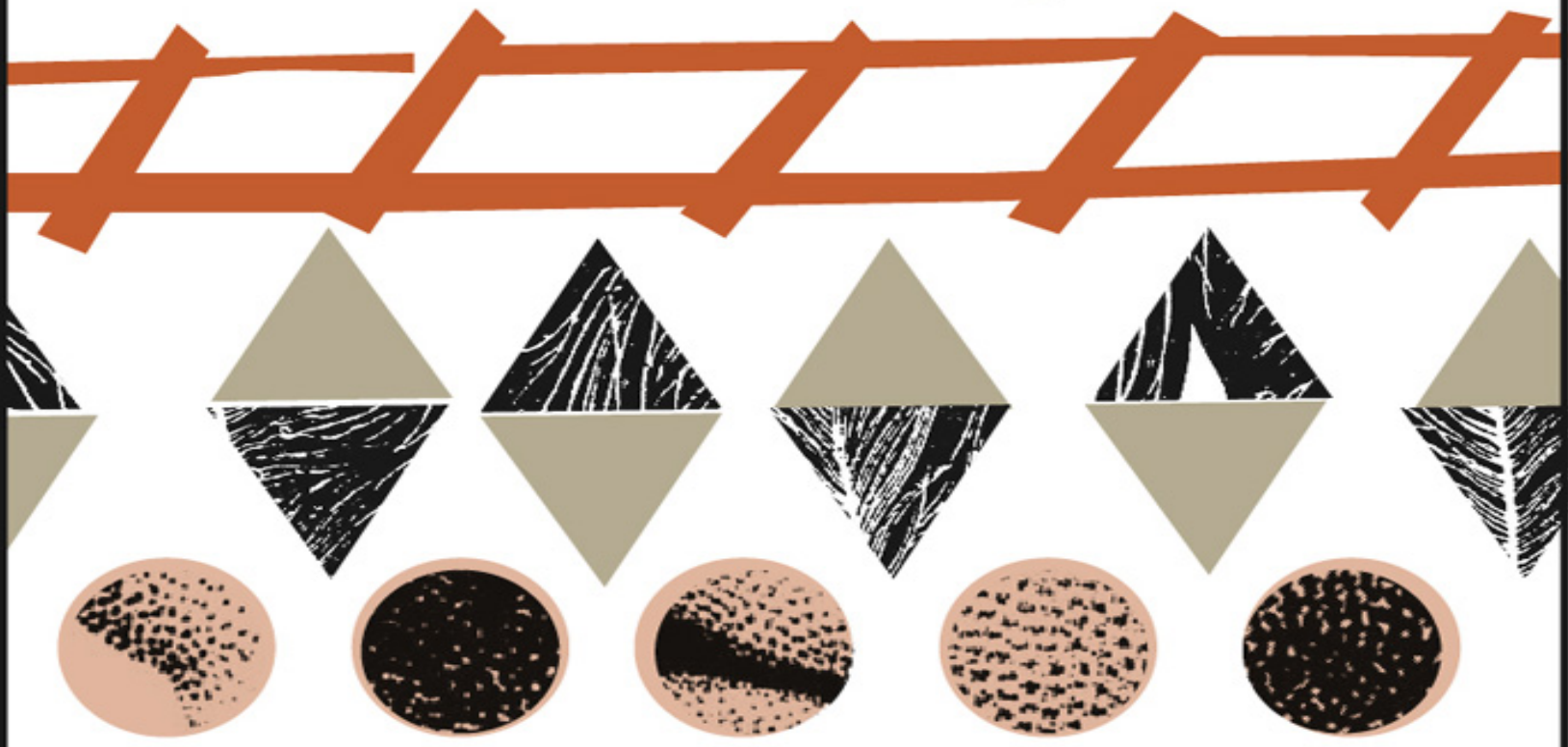
TRAM 83



FISTON MWANZA MUJILA

Foreword by Alain Mabanckou

Translated from the French by Roland Glasser

Praise For Fiston Mwanza Mujila & Tram 83

- *Winner of a* FRENCH VOICES AWARD *from the Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the US, 2014*

"*Tram 83* isn't for the faint of heart, but rather, it's for those that have a sense of humor, an interest in seedy underbellies, and a willingness to, at times, feel a little lost in the haze of biblical imagery, flippant debauchery, free sex, and anarchy. Ezra Pound would be proud; Mujila 'made it new.'"
— JOSH COOK, *Foreword Reviews*

"Talk about verve — and *vivre*: Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* introduces a rousing, remarkable new voice to this world, surely in its original French, most definitely in Roland Glasser's superb translation. This book has drive and force and movement, it has hops and chops. It has voices!"
— RICK SIMONSON, ELLIOTT BAY BOOK COMPANY (SEATTLE, WA)

"I was totally into the wild formal thug-haunted adventurousness of *Tram 83*."
— FORREST GANDER, author of *The Trace*

"*Blade Runner* in Africa with a John Coltrane soundtrack."
— MARK HABER, BRAZOS BOOKSTORE (HOUSTON, TX)

"Through observation and conversation, the reader is exposed to the economic boom and cultural bust of contemporary Africa in search of what the future holds for human relationships and survival in a place where tradition and personal histories are quickly being swept under the

rug by global forces. Mujila captures chaos in a hypnotic free-jazz rhythm that is so rarely found in novels of this scope."
— KEVIN ELLIOTT, 57TH STREET BOOKS (CHICAGO, IL)

"*Tram 83* is part *Satantango*, part *Fitzcarraldo*, and part *Blood Meridian.* A dark, funny, and true accomplishment."
— CHAD FELIX, WORD BOOKSTORES (BROOKLYN, NY & JERSEY CITY, NJ)

"Q: What if Césaire beat Houellebecq at his own game? A: *Tram 83*."
— DUSTIN KURTZ

"*Tram 83* reads like a modern, twisted *The Great Gatsby*. … An unaffected view of humanity that is at once repulsive, hilarious, and oddly uplifting. …The novel, like the nightclub, is eccentric and somewhat disturbing, yet inclusive and universally appealing."
— CAITLIN THOMAS, *Three Percent*

More international praise for Fiston Mwanza Mujila & Tram 83

- *Winner of the* GRAND PRIX SGDL DU PREMIER ROMAN (*for Debut Novel*), *2014*
- *Shortlisted for the* PRIX DU MONDE (*Le Monde Literary Prize*), *2014*
- *Shortlisted for the* PRIX WEPLER-FONDATION LA POSTE, *2014*
- LITERARY PRIZE OF THE CITY OF GRAZ, *Austria, 2014*
- GOLDEN MEDAL IN LITERATURE *of the VI Jeux de la Francophonie in Beirut*

"A real discovery among this season's novels."

— author ALAIN MABANCKOU, *Jeune Afrique*

“One of the more exciting discoveries of the fall … Frenetic, flamboyant, and intense, there are touches of Hieronymus Bosch. An insolent, globe-trotting Bosch, who would have read Gabriel García Márquez and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.”
— *Le Monde*

“Invigorating and astounding, the linguistic creativity of Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s writing paints a vivid picture of an imaginary Africa.”
— *Le Populaire du Centre*

“A debut novel with a vertiginous rhythm. Picaresque poetry turned into music by a mix of slam and a series of loops and turns as bewitching as a sustained jazz melody.”
— *Livres Hebdo*

“*Tram 83* is a high-speed trip, a tragic, burlesque, melancholic, melodic tale.”
— *LIRE Magazine*

“Watch out for this blazing comet! *Tram 83* will sweep you off your feet like a Coltrane number, and never put you down again.”
— *Rolling Stone* (France)

“Mujila has invented “locomotive literature,” and the genre of the “stage-tale,” making his debut novel the manifesto for a convulsive poetic prose, a cross between Aimé Césaire and Boris Vian.”
— *Le Nouvel Observateur*

“A novel of mind-blowing, poetic beauty.”
— *Point Magazine*

“This debut novel heralds a promising literary career.”
— *Notre Afrik*

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TRAM 83

Fiston Mwanza Mujila

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

ROLAND GLASSER

FOREWORD BY

ALAIN MABANCKOU

DEEP VELLUM PUBLISHING

DALLAS, TEXAS

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FOREWORD

BY ALAIN MABANCKOU

I was fortunate enough to get to read some of Fiston Mwanza Mujila's poetry a few years back. I didn't know at the time that he was busy writing a novel, or for that matter the degree to which I would be moved by his new work and how each page would bring me so much joy. When I turned the last page, I exclaimed: "This is a masterpiece!"

Fiston Mwanza Mujila took the French literary scene by storm in 2014. His native Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), one of the most populated countries in Africa, had been waiting for some time for a great novelist to come along, a novelist who was truly one of theirs, speaking their language. Fiston has met their expectations.

Tram 83 is written with the kind of magic one finds in only the best of storytellers, an astute observer of everyday life and a genuine philosopher. His words bring to life the city of Lubumbashi, filled with a cast of characters, writers, drunkards, drug dealers, dreamers, lost souls, all living side by side in the popular neighborhoods in which all of life's pleasures are traded. And then there's also the "trashy side" of life, the drugs and the vodka, a glimpse at the underbelly of life that is so rarely featured in sub-Saharan African literature, a world far from the images on the postcards sold to tourists. Fiston's novel has lifted the

veil Africa has been compelled to wear over the years, and she now stands naked before us. His voice is original, a genuine breath of fresh air, and we will surely be following this exciting new voice in the years to come. I can hardly believe *Tram 83* is a first novel … So much creativity, linguistic innovation, and such a pleasure to read!

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1.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STONE, AND THE STONE PROMPTED OWNERSHIP, AND OWNERSHIP A RUSH, AND THE RUSH BROUGHT AN INFLUX OF MEN OF DIVERSE APPEARANCE WHO BUILT RAILROADS THROUGH THE ROCK, FORGED A LIFE OF PALM WINE, AND DEVISED A SYSTEM, A MIXTURE OF MINING AND TRADING.

Northern Station. Friday. Around seven or nine in the evening.

“Patience, friend, you know full well our trains have lost all sense of time.”

The Northern Station was going to the dogs. It was essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that called to mind the railroad built by Stanley, cassava fields, cut-rate hotels, greasy spoons, bordellos, Pentecostal churches, bakeries, and noise engineered by men of all generations and nationalities combined. It was the only place on earth you could hang yourself, defecate, blaspheme, fall into infatuation, and thieve without regard to prying eyes. Indeed, an air of connivance hung ever about the place. Jackals don’t eat jackals. They pounce on the turkeys and partridges, and devour them. According to the fickle but ever-recurring legend, the seeds of all resistance movements, all wars of liberation, sprouted at the station,

between two locomotives. And as if that weren't enough, the same legend claims that the building of the railroad resulted in numerous deaths attributed to tropical diseases, technical blunders, the poor working conditions imposed by the colonial authorities — in short, all the usual clichés.

Northern Station. Friday. Around seven or nine.

He'd been there nearly three hours, jostling with the passers-by as he waited for the train to arrive. Lucien had been at pains to insist on the sense of time, and on these trains that broke all records of derailment, delay, and overcrowding. Requiem had better things to do than wait for this individual who, with the passing of the years, had lost all importance in his eyes. Ever since he'd turned his back on Marxism, Requiem called everyone who deprived him of his freedom of thought and action armchair communists and slum ideologues. He had merchandise to deliver, his life depended on it. But the train carrying that son of a bitch Lucien was dragging its wheels.

Northern Station. Friday. Around …

"Would you care for some company, sir?"

A girl, dressed for a Friday night in a station whose metal structure is unfinished, had come up to him. A moment to size up the merchandise, a dull thud, a racket that marked the entrance of the beast.

"Do you have the time, citizen?"

He had adequately assayed the chick and even imagined her lying on her mean little bed, despite the half-light. He pulled her body against his, asked her name, "Call me Requiem," stroked his fingers across the young creature's breasts, then another line: "Your thighs have the allure of a vodka bottle …" before disappearing into the murky gloom of the slimy, sticky crowd.

Instructions were required. To designate a place they could chat without distraction. The young woman grew

pushy. He sighed, bit his lip, and sputtered: “Meet you at Tram 83.” Quite pointless, of course, for he had to take that Lucien home. Requiem shook his head at the very idea. And then there was the merchandise to be delivered to the tourists freshly arrived from Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, the racket had increased tenfold. The curse of these trains that arrived at this time of night was that they carried all the scum, be they students or mineworkers, who couldn’t get back to town under their own steam. For reasons still unknown, the railroad cut the only university in the region in two. Afternoon classes were disrupted not by the ruckus of the engine but by students gathering their things and leaving the premises, because if you missed those trains, you’d piss your pants, dear intellectual. The few professors who crashed in the suburbs of the City-State slipped their moorings along with their disciples. The survival instinct can’t be learned. It’s innate. Otherwise they’d have introduced instinct classes at university already. The trains passed without stopping, which meant the swiftest students had to grab ahold of the beat up railcars. All’s fair in love and war! In stark contrast to these impulsive students with their sense of entitlement were the brutish diggers, who departed and returned on the same contraptions. The former reproached the latter for selling short their dignity to the mining operators and brokers of diverse origin. The latter couldn’t care less, displaying, through their rotten luck and bodies stiffened with radioactivity, that you needn’t spend time in the classroom to fuck and then clink glasses of ice-cool beer after. Some students even scratched out a living in the mines to pay their debts.

Requiem began to search for the needle in the haystack. The scrawny students, overwhelmed by the goings-on, and angry too, brandished theories like spoils of war. The miner-diggers, or digger-miners, it depends, voiced imprecations we shall refrain from expressing. Every evening, the same opera. They eyed each other up, balked,

traded insults, and even came to blows. A legend suggested the figure of one thousand seven hundred dead in the most recent clashes, without counting suffocations and other serious injuries.

Weary from the noise, and the alcohol he'd just consumed, Requiem leaned against a pillar, waiting for them to vacate the field. They loitered on the platforms till late into the night: the students with their strike, the miner-diggers with their stinking rusty breath.

"I'm a free woman, but I'm still looking for the man of my dreams."

He was already thinking of the silicone breasts of the girl waiting for him at Tram 83. But after so many years apart, how could he abandon Lucien and slip into the folds of the night with that doll? The students and the diggers of mines were still squaring off. As the flurry of insults reached its peak, they headed off on the same road to nowhere. Requiem sensed a presence. He raised his eyebrows: Lucien, in the flesh but skeletal. Requiem stepped forward. He realized that his friend had lost all his weight. That an era was on the wane. That a civilization was champing at the bit. Lucien was dressed all in black, the harmony broken only by a red scarf, the wad of papers under his arm, and an imitation-leather bag, worn thin, slung over his shoulder. Tousled hair. Crumpled face. Mustache intact. Cold gaze. Hoarse voice. They embraced without much enthusiasm.

"The bastards, don't tell me they've mangled your brains."

"What's your news?"

"What about Jacqueline?"

"Long story."

"How did you get out?"

"I'll tell you."

"The bastards, the bastards, they …"

"Shall we go?"

“Yes,” replied Requiem, coldly, no doubt haunted by the girl dressed for a Friday night in a station whose metal structure is unfinished, where dissident sex-starved rebels, students, and diggers head off on the same road.

“I’m a really sensitive girl.”

Two fat tears slid down the face of the man who’d arrived by train in this station whose metal structure … In silence, they crossed the concourse and the other fragments of the station, where neglected single-mamas roamed, along with professors selling their lecture notes, intellectuals reeking of salted fish, and Cuban musicians performing salsa, flamenco, and merengue for no reason at all.

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2.

FIRST NIGHT AT TRAM 83: NIGHT OF DEBAUCHERY, NIGHT OF BOOZING, NIGHT OF BEGGARY, NIGHT OF PREMATURE EJACULATION, NIGHT OF SYPHILIS AND OTHER SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES, NIGHT OF PROSTITUTION, NIGHT OF GETTING BY, NIGHT OF DANCING AND DANCING, NIGHT THAT ENGENDERS THINGS THAT EXIST ONLY BETWEEN AN EXCESS OF BEER AND THE INTENTION TO EMPTY ONE'S POCKET THAT EXHALES CONFLICT MINERALS, THIS COW-DUNG ELEVATED TO A RAW MATERIAL, IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE STONE …

"We walked through the darkness of history. We were the cash cows of a system of thought that profited from our tender age, that crushed us completely. We were a piece of shit."

"We had an ideal, innocence …"

"Innocence," echoed Requiem, bursting into laughter. "You really mean innocence? Innocence is cowardice. You have to move with the times, brother."

"You haven't changed a bit."

"You don't age here. You simply exist."

"Requiem …"

"It's New Mexico, here. Every man for himself, and shit for all."

Tram 83 was one of the most popular restaurants and hooker bars, its renown stretching beyond the City-State's borders. "See Tram 83 and die," was the regular refrain of the tourists who blew into town from the four corners of the globe to conduct their business. During the day they wandered zombie-like through the mining concessions they owned by the dozen, and at night they ended up in Tram 83 to refresh their memory. This gave the place every appearance of a true theater, if not a massive circus. Here's the kind of thing you might hear as background noise:

"I want to massage you by way of foreplay, then slowly suck you off, suck your whole body, suck you till my mouth runs dry."

Not only at Tram 83, but even at the university and in the mines, unmarried women didn't hold back from accosting potential clients with the same psalms.

Inadvertent musicians and elderly prostitutes and prestidigitators and Pentecostal preachers and students resembling mechanics and doctors conducting diagnoses in nightclubs and young journalists already retired and transvestites and second-foot shoe peddlers and porn film fans and highwaymen and pimps and disbarred lawyers and casual laborers and former transsexuals and polka dancers and pirates of the high seas and seekers of political asylum and organized fraudsters and archeologists and would-be bounty hunters and modern day adventurers and explorers searching for a lost civilization and human organ dealers and farmyard philosophers and hawkers of fresh water and hairdressers and shoeshine boys and repairers of spare parts and soldiers' widows and sex maniacs and lovers of romance novels and dissident rebels and brothers in Christ and druids and shamans and aphrodisiac vendors and scriveners and purveyors of real fake passports and gun-runners and porters and bric-a-brac traders and mining prospectors short on liquid assets and Siamese twins and Mamelukes and carjackers and colonial infantrymen and

haruspices and counterfeiters and rape-starved soldiers and drinkers of adulterated milk and self-taught bakers and marabouts and mercenaries claiming to be one of Bob Denard's crew and inveterate alcoholics and diggers and militiamen proclaiming themselves "masters of the world" and poseur politicians and child soldiers and Peace Corps activists gamely tackling a thousand nightmarish railroad construction projects or small-scale copper or manganese mining operations and baby-chicks and drug dealers and busgirls and pizza delivery guys and growth hormone merchants, all sorts of tribes overran Tram 83, in search of good times on the cheap.

"Would you gentlemen care for some company?"

Barely sixteen, trussed into a couple of tiny corsets, the two girls welcomed them with inscrutable smiles. Requiem settled on the one with hair like wooded savannah.

"Your breasts quench my thirst."

"Sir."

"How much for a massage session?"

The girl stated a figure.

"You know the Tokyo stock market is in freefall?"

She held him by the wrists.

"Profit equals retail price plus wholesale price minus packaging."

A large sign on the Tram's frontage stated:

ENTRY INADVISABLE FOR THE POOR, THE WRETCHED, THE UNCIRCUMCISED, HISTORIANS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS, COWARDS, PSYCHOLOGISTS, CHEAPSKATES, MORONS, THE INSOLVENT, AND ALL OF YOU UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO BE UNDER FOURTEEN, NOT FORGETTING THE ELECTED MEMBERS OF THE TWELFTH HOUSE, PENNILESS DIGGERS, SADISTIC STUDENTS, POLITICIANS OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC, HISTORIANS, KNOW-IT-ALLS, AND SNITCHES. Requiem

took the girl's phone number. They entered the establishment. There was nothing special about Tram 83. It was dark all around, like the Lascaux Caves. Men. Women. Children. All with glasses and smokes. At the back, a combo was shamelessly massacring a Coltrane number, "Summertime," no doubt. They headed toward the bar. Two girls with massive-melon-breasts immediately followed them; it's called "shadowing."

"Do you have the time?"

Nothing. Requiem's eyes patrolled the brassieres. One of them was the girl who'd accosted him at the station whose metal structure …

"Do you have the time?" hammered the single-mamas, stern and resolute.

It was a mammoth task to identify all the women who entered Tram 83. They struggled fiercely against aging. Difficult to venture a distinction between the girls under sixteen, called baby-chicks, the single-mamas or those aged between twenty and forty and referred to as single-mamas even when they don't have children, and the ageless-women whose fixed age begins at forty-one. None of them wanted to gain a single day. They piled on the makeup from morning till night, wore fake breasts, employed strong-arm tactics to entice the clients, and used foreign-sounding names, such as Marilyn Monroe, Sylvie Vartan, Romy Schneider, Bessie Smith, Marlene Dietrich, or Simone de Beauvoir, to make their mark on the world.

"Go check your papa's watch!" Requiem retorted.

They took the third table on the left, at the corner of the bar, which afforded an unbeatable view over the front doors and the jazzmen continuing to prostitute music and the restrooms and the bar counter and a row of antipathetic, aggressive, and somewhat mature single-mamas. In his moments of madness, Requiem would tell anyone who'd listen that in order to monitor the comings and goings, and the baptism albums, it was preferable to choose a table

affording a panorama of the aforementioned areas, to recap: the bar counter, the sanitary facilities, the lone women, the front doors, the musicians, even when they rushed into the dressing rooms to smoke their marijuana, the waitresses, the busgirls, and so on. They remained for several minutes without speaking to each other. It was a feat of courage to attempt a dialogue amid this pandemonium created by a deviant music and the yelling of the tourists and other upstarts who identified with the atmosphere, waxing ecstatic, grooving, whispering, howling, and pulling out money they threw in the direction of the musicians. “Give me a real cuddle.” “Do you have the time?” “I give you my body, chain me up, make me your slave, your property, your private hunting ground.” All of which fueled the fervor of the band, and consequently the lynching of that beautiful melody. In the labyrinths of the City-State, you don’t listen to jazz to get a whiff of sugar cane or reconnect with Negro consciousness or savor the beauty of the notes: you listen to jazz because you have to listen jazz when you make your bed on banknotes, when you deliver your merchandise daily, when you manage an extraction plant, when you’re cousin to the dissident General, when you keep a little mistress who pins you to your bed in a dizzy haze. Jazz is a sign of nobility, it’s the music of the rich and the newly rich, of those who build this beautiful broken world. Such people don’t listen to rumba, which they find dirty, primitive, and unfit for the ear. Between rumba and jazz lies an ocean, they say. You don’t listen to jazz the way you’d fling yourself into a Zairian-spiced rumba. Jazz is above all a precipitous slope, a cliff you can only climb if you possess a notion of its origins, its development, its major figures. Jazz is no longer the story of the Negroes. Only tourists and those who master money know the foundations of this music. It’s the only identification for a certain bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie of the eleventh hour. Consequently, when the musicians get

jazzing, all of Tram 83 stirs from its sleeping sickness. The slightest saxophone, and it's the great masquerade. The diggers and the students adopt the manner of the tourists. They watch, smile, raise their beer glasses, walk, blaze a trail to the dance floor, hail the waitresses and busgirls in the manner of the tourists, take on the haughty bearing of samurai, the gestures and attitudes of a Maharaja, the poise of the Dalai Lama. The honeys, the waitresses, and the busgirls don't let themselves be browbeaten. Smiles like the Queen of England, they mime imaginary empresses. Jazz is the only lever used by all the riffraff of Tram 83 to switch social class as one would subway cars.

"Me, you, love, it's me, make love to me, you and me, love make …"

The two companions looked at each other without a word. Lucien was amazed at the bureaucratic slowness of the service. Requiem held the password, the rules of the road, the attached document, the riddle. The waitresses and busgirls tried to make themselves seem important by dragging their feet, sulking, and aggravating the clientele.

"Do you have the time?" insisted other young women standing around, come to assist the first pair, chests jutting, ready and willing to administer massage sessions, cuddles, and other ingredients of the night.

A genuine postcolonial couple sat beside them. The man, who looked about twenty, his hands all over the bust of his spouse, a seventy-eight-year-old lady, as Requiem confirmed, recited his breviary: "You have a smile that perturbs me deeply. I love you day and night. I love you Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday …" He could only be a student, or a civil servant in a small state firm gone bankrupt. It's a waste to be young in this part of equatorial Africa. The under-thirty-fives are potentially embittered, xenophobes, crooks, hucksters, capable of using any ploy, be it jazz or a balancing marriage, to escape the prison that is poverty.

“The phenomenon of rebalancing, of matching, and of corporeal integration relates to both cases,” Requiem continued, between two smokes. “I spent some six months managing an agency that facilitated meetings between young men and adult women, or baby-chicks and tourists.”

“Do you have the time?”

“Go check your papa’s watch!”

The clientele smoked like crazy, identified with the jazz, groped each other in the dark, and grabbed at the single-mamas. A sullen-faced waitress finally came. Spitefully, she placed on the table the two bottles of beer she was supposed to have served them an hour and a quarter ago. They paid the check but she stood there waiting for her tip. They made as if nothing was up. She cottoned on to the strategy and cunningly counterattacked by refusing to open the merchandise. Lucien took out a coin but Requiem stayed his hand.

“RULE NUMBER 1: never let yourself be intimidated by a waitress struck with hysteria. We’re not in Moscow. Tipping is obligatory here. But we who are familiar with the New World are an exception. We crush any attempt to make us tip by force. Let the waitresses file a complaint! The mines and their tourists know me. They know me, the tourists and mines.”

She was having none of it.

“Gigolo!”

“Tipping is an archaism, I give when I like.”

To close the case, they decided to open the bottles with their teeth. Offended, she insulted them, threatened them with a penknife, picked up the glasses, and vanished. They began to drink straight from the bottles. The musicians continued their ramble, the tourists too, the young man and his ageless-woman, the girls with the round-juicy-breasts trotting out their one and only hymn:

“Do you have the time?”

“Maybe …”

Lucien took out his notebook, wrote: “This is not a bar. Where will they go to let off steam when there’s no more women to match their fantasies? Where will they go to deposit their seed? Where will they go to drown their misfortunes when there’s nowhere left to get hammered? Where will they go to shake their hips when there’s no more salsa? Salsa and jazz are not eternal; what will they do to identify with the Azerbaijani tourists?”

Requiem received phone calls, which he answered before continuing: “Good evening sir, good evening lieutenant, would Madame like, good evening citizen, RULE NUMBER 10, you-touch/you-play, double or quits, loser wins, the legend round here says the City-State dies on its feet, is sir Belgian?”

As the beer flowed, they held fast to the obvious. The backwash had cleared the way for them. They could no longer sing from the same hymn sheet. They were just two life forms adrift in a city become a state by force of Kalashnikovs.

“Tip!”

The government army and the dissident rebels fought each other day in, day out. To get things back on track, the international community had sponsored nineteen sovereign national conferences which had all come to less than naught. Despite its soldiers trained in China, Sudan, Angola, and Cuba, the central government had failed to wring the neck of the rebellion, which reproached the central government for hanging on to the lion’s share. “Without our province, this country is a masquerade,” thundered the dissident General. “We can’t make do with crumbs when it’s we who are feeding you.” The rebels fought with arrows, machetes, and slingshots. They brought a witch doctor up to the front line with them, and observed all sorts of prohibitions supposed to render them invulnerable: sexual abstinence of unlimited duration, no bathing, or eating beef, or wearing shoes, and so on.

Exasperated by the length of the conflict, the rebels retreated to a small stretch of land in the extremely wealthy and coveted province they called the City-State. And as if that weren't enough, they gave the former national territory, which was pointlessly vast, as barren as one could wish, and crossed by a wide river that served practically no purpose except to flow toward its ocean suicide, the name Back-Country.

The varyingly moneyed tribes stormed the capital of the City-State, the smallest capital in the world, barely comprising a bar, the famous Tram, and the station whose unfinished metal structure brought to mind the figure of Henry Morton Stanley. The legend places these tribes into three categories.

First category: individuals who live by day, most of whom are civil servants saddled with many months' worth of non-payment, the detail of which they alone possess, but they're all up to their necks. They lived miserably even before the secession.

"Do you have the time?"

The second category comprises sleepwalkers. They're scared of croaking in their sleep, it seems. Reason for which they guzzle a potion that keeps them on standby, day and night. This group includes the students, the diggers, the baby-chicks, the for-profit tourists, and the friends and close collaborators of the Dissidence.

Finally, the most hardheaded category, in which we find the single-mamas, the human organ dealers, the child-soldiers with their Kalashnikovs, the apostles, the night waitresses and busgirls, the musicians from the former Zaire, the bandits, and other burglars. They sleep during the day. They know, more than any man, how to make both ends of the week meet. Honorary doctors in all fields (corruption, drugs, sex, looting, minerals, embezzlement, serious drinking …), the night is their main stock-in-trade.

The jazzmen retired to a Gillespie tune, “A Night in Tunisia.”

Three Nigerians, sagging at the knees, thick prescription glasses, Afro hair, bell-bottom pants, striped shirts, took over. Tree that obscures the forest, their only song, “Life Cries Out, When Will You Wipe My Tears?,” stretched away on its thirteen verses till daybreak.

“We’re in for four hours of balladry,” whispered Requiem, staring at the young lady appraising them from the gallery.

The Nigerians, who hailed from Ogbomosho, recounted the adventures of a princess “who alighted in the City-State one January night and succumbed to the charms of a married digger with two children. She befriended the wife of her lover, whom she showered with gifts.” The rest of the saga remained a mystery to all, since the final six verses were in Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa.

“Tip …”

“Why do you keep going to the restroom? You’ll piss your brains out.”

“Do you have the time?”

This second part of the song triggered weeping and gnashing of teeth. One of the trinity shattered the ceiling with his husky voice honed by second-lip cigarettes, electrifying the entire Tram. While the Nigerians wailed, a bare-breasted-single-mama, armed with a shopping basket, walked between the tables. The for-profit tourists, the miners, the students, the waitresses, the busgirls, the itinerant Pentecostal preachers, the high priests of the Second Republic forced back from their golden exile, and other derelicts of life repented, opened their hearts, and chucked in some coins.

“Do you have the time?”

Requiem sipped from the bottle, his left hand stuffed down his pants.

“You’re never safe from some kind of poisoning,” he trotted out, as if to denounce the austere demeanor of the waitresses and busgirls.

Requiem and Lucien carried on downing their beers, exchanging glances, brief phrases, hollow laughs. They had nothing, or nearly nothing left to chat about after ten years of estrangement. They avoided mentioning Jacqueline. Weird, all the same. Lucien, once so talkative, stumbled over his words. Every now and then, he pulled a notebook from his satchel. Wrote up Tram 83 and its girls with elastic breasts. Wrote up the stink of the diggers mad for rear-entry sex. Wrote up the madness of the suicidals. Wrote up the anxiety of the tourists. Wrote up the over-zealous greetings of the baby-chicks.

“Do you have the time?”

Wrote up the jazzmen, the Nigerian jazzmen, hailing from Ogbomosho.

Lucien pushed himself desperately to converse.

“What do you do in your spare time?”

“You remember our first performance, the room full to bursting?”

Requiem remained evasive, reticent, and churlish.

“My past holds no interest for me.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Maybe.”

“Time flies.”

“I like money.”

“You work hard, as far as I can see.”

“You’re stepping on my turf.”

“You …”

“I don’t like this jazz.”

“I’m just scribbling a text.”

“The New World, the baby-chicks eat by the sweat of their breasts.”

“I’m happy to see you again.”

“You’re getting on my nerves.”

In the meantime, he assessed the curves patrolling the sector. Steatopygia remained the epitome of beauty. All the honeys swore by Brazilian buttocks alone. You had to have those buttocks, or nothing. They would desperately slug a particular soy-based drink, take pills, and swallow food intended for pigs in order to increase the area of their rumps. The results left much to be desired: buttocks shaped like pineapples, avocados, balloons, or baseballs; one buttock excessively more pronounced than the other; oblique, square, or rectangular buttocks; buttocks that pedaled all by themselves, and so on. A young lady came up to them. They debated in Morse, about the price no doubt. The young lady drifted off toward the restrooms. Requiem stood up and followed the prey. The restrooms at Tram 83 were mixed, and were not categorized by sex or by the provenance of the tourists. They lacked lighting, the better to facilitate the dance of bodies. Requiem and the girl entered the cave, and exited faces streaked with sweat. The young woman hurriedly pulled up the zipper of her skin-tight jeans, while Requiem took a phone call, told them to "take the car and collect the merchandise, asshole!"

"Tip …"

"Do you have the time?"

"What do you do in your spare time?"

"The New World …"

"Doggy-style, I can even suck you off."

"I love to give head."

A tourist scooted into the Tram, half drunk.

"See that guy there, I've got him in my pocket," said Requiem, looking the man up and down. "It's always useful to hold on to the pictures of someone. I've had his pictures for two years now, and for those two years he's been my slave. He'd even suck my cock if I wanted."

"What pictures?"

"I'll explain. What's more, I'll manage to get yours too."

The tourist headed over to Requiem and Lucien as soon as he saw them, and greeted the pair with considerable effusion.

“Stuff your bellies, eat your fill, drink as much as you like, tell them to put it on my tab. I’m just going to let the owner know.”

Requiem burst out laughing.

Lucien, his nerves in disarray, was seized by a pain in his abdomen. The train journey had wrecked him. He forced himself to remain upright so as not to displease Requiem, who was in no mood to chat. They left the premises as the angelus rang. Outside, nothing but high society. Two beauties suggested a deal. “We can get you hot!” Lucien stammered, professing exhaustion. Requiem recommended a medicinal potion. Requiem sweet-talked the girls, who were already demanding a down payment for the time lost “in pointless debate, given that you want to go with us.” Requiem mollified Lucien, who continued to gripe. Requiem took command of the situation.

“The New World, New Mexico, the contemporary era …”

“I’m married.”

“There’s no such thing as a faithful man.”

“But Requiem …”

“I don’t wish to be rude.”

“Think of Jacqueline …”

“She can find a man to bone.”

One of the two girls: “We give good head.”

A boy ran up to them, carrying a container. They got themselves some peanuts, lemons, and kebabs, as well as kola nuts and other aphrodisiacs. In the distance, between two melancholic calls of “Do you have the time?”, the imprecations of the diggers, a fatwa, hurled from a minaret, demanding the summary execution of the proprietor of Tram 83, a slot machine out in the open, run by a bunch of Mozambicans, the throbbing of old jalopies,

the monologues of a Kalashnikov, the mournful and nostalgic lamentations of a bitch in heat.

“Do you have the time?”

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3.

AT REQUIEM’S PLACE WITH THE SINGLE-MAMAS AND THEIR MASSIVE-MELON-BREASTS.

Requiem lived in Vampiretown, a bourgeois neighborhood that stood on the road leading from the station to the town center. The apartment he rented was quite spacious for a modern day bachelor. Vampiretown dated from the colonial period. Built to demarcate the area, using sturdy materials and terra cotta tiles, its wide boulevards lined with flame trees, pines, and frangipanis. The first Europeans to settle here died from the effects

“You guys live alone?”

“Yes!”

“We give good head.”

of the dodgy sanitary and weather conditions, as they were wont to do. The place had to be adapted at all costs: build suitable walls, fight the feeling of exile and uprooting that adversely affected their “transactions,” guffawed Requiem, he who bore the blood of a Russian shipowner come to seek his fortune in the scorching tropics. The Tram 83 gossip of July 1972 speculated upon his Slavic origins. The Tram 83 gossip of February 1982 speculated upon his Vietnamese origins. The Tram 83 gossip of September 1992 speculated upon his Comorian origins. According to legend, a foundry was established to

“Call me Astrid. I can’t live without caresses.”

“Émilienne, I’m as free as the ocean.”

“Requiem …”

“Talk, I’m listening.”

extract copper ingots. And it wasn’t far from this venture that they chose to site the new town. The foundry workers lodged in the surrounding area. Administrative offices, banking, postal services, all sprang up around twelve miles away. They … In the beginning the stone, and the stone, the railroads, and the railroads, and the arrival of men of diverse nationalities speaking the same dialect of sex and coltan. Drunk on sex and easy money, perverts they were, born adventurers, capable of trying any lead as long as it paid, as long as it earned them money and sex, and even more money!

“I’m not going to screw. I’m fucked for tonight.”

“That’s a sleazy joke.”

Round about the years 1910-1920, the segregation between the Europeans and Africans translated into urban planning. The newcomers, shouldering their universities, schools, hospitals, and churches, were careful to stay in town,

“The Far West?”

“Why?”

“We are of the railroad civilization …”

“What is it with my breasts?!”

obliging the others, natives of their species, to live in the suburbs. The only ones to penetrate the closed circles were a few musicians, their repertoire spiced with gospel from Southern Africa, places like Northern Rhodesia or Nyasaland. Same for the lackeys and a few right-hand men. For reasons that were more or less vague.

“What is it with my breasts?”

They crossed a dozen rails, stepping from one to the next, and walked down the main road for a good half hour, groping each other.

“I love money. Who hates money?”

Arrived. Negotiated the rates, first up then down. Smoked nicotine after nicotine. Manufactured heaven in pasture and cloud. Even traced out straight lines and oblique angles. In other words, pleasures of the underbelly.

“Cuddle me …”

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4.

MEN AND WINDS HAVE THIS IN COMMON: NEITHER HAVE THEIR FEET ON THE GROUND. NOMADS, THEY COME AND GO LIKE THE PAIN OF SHATTERED LOVE, NERVOUS TENSION, INDEPENDENCIES, WARS OF LIBERATION, THE URGENT NEED TO DEFECATE IN THE STAIRWELL OF A BUILDING BETWEEN TWO BLACKOUTS.

Lucien got out of bed at three in the afternoon. Requiem and the girls had already taken leave of him. He was groggy, rocked by nausea and migraines. Lucien experienced this kind of malaise after drinking one too many. But why on earth had he let himself succumb to inebriation before rounding things off with some below-the-belt delight? He ascribed his tiredness to the latter, and his nausea and migraines to the alcohol. He tried to walk. His calves wobbled. Impossible to move.

“Requiem!”

He yelled out for him. Nothing. His companion must be busy sorting out some cash deal. Otherwise, why leave so early, with no concern for his own dramas? He went back to sleep, eyes half closed.

Lucien was susceptible to bad dreams. He’d had two, one after the other, without the slightest break. He set to analyzing them. There was nothing apocalyptic about the first dream. A metallic voice squawking from Jacqueline’s

face instructed him to grab his texts and climb aboard the first train leaving for the Back-Country, the land flowing with milk and honey. And he, in a sleeveless outfit, on a theater stage, balked, scoffed at the voice and the face, and held forth in a language lacking r's, z's, t's, a's, and s's. He defended himself, claiming that his life was his own, that he could fling it about wherever it suited him. But the voice and the features took on a different appearance. He noticed he was not on a theater stage but in a little boat leaving a misty port; between his legs, a cat was licking his left foot.

He shook his head, gave a hoarse shout, grabbed his satchel, took out his notebook, scrawled a few lines. He began to examine the characters from his dream step by step. The barking voice — God perhaps, or ancestors hungry for solitude. He was devoted to the souls of his ancestors, but his spiritual life had changed since the death of his daughter. Why only Jacqueline's face and not that of Requiem or even Émilienne? Perhaps because you've only just seen her nakedness, he told himself. Even so, what's that got to do with it? And how about the train evoking desertion and exile? And the little boat? And the cat with the same colors as Juventus?

Second dream. Like the prologue of the first, he's on a stage, but for music this time, accompanying Toumani Diabaté: *The Mandé Variations*. At the end of a song, everyone, musicians included, begs him to quit the City-State. In his dream he gets up to leave. Where to? He becomes aware of his nakedness, damp with sweat, dirty. His shoes, clothes, satchel, notebook, and handkerchief, gone! He sets out to walk with nothing on. And that's when a huge, bustling crowd starts chasing him, gesticulating aggressively, uttering threats and parables. He leans down, plumps up the pillow, continues deciphering the riddle. He sighs and embarks on another sleep, another dream most likely.

Requiem was still not back. The man with train-track feet returned only to pick up more dough or stash some away. The neighboring tenants hated him with one eye and admired him with the other. Whenever he returned from his escapades, everyone in the building crumpled beneath his skyjacker charm. Requiem for a New World alias Local Boy alias Man and His Destiny alias Al Pacino alias The Myth of Sisyphus alias The Founder alias The Authorized Signatory alias King Nzinga Nkuwu alias His Serene Highness alias Ancien Régime alias The Lord of the Rings alias Marshal alias Supreme Leader alias Patriarch alias Man of Discernment alias Zambezi River alias Hitler alias Don Quixote alias Proto-Bantu alias Lino Ventura (full name Angiolino Giuseppe Pasquale Ventura) alias Neanderthal Man alias Venezuela alias Négritude alias Zanzibar alias Siberia alias Bertolt Brecht alias Demi-God alias National Identity alias Colonist alias Polish alias What More Could You Ask For alias No Entry alias Obama alias Away Goals Count Double alias Dostoyevsky alias The Most Mysterious Marquis alias Sultan alias Cousin of the Dissident General alias Pasha alias Mani Kongo alias Susuhunan alias Raja alias Minangkabao (generally shortened to Minang, or improperly called Orang Padang) alias The Negus alias Black Market alias Haile Selassie alias Prince-Provost of Berchtesgaden alias Maharajadhiraja (meaning King of Kings) alias Shah alias Tika Sahib Bahadur alias Caliph alias Emir alias Fatwa alias Freiherr (German for Free Lord) alias Makoko de Mbe (king of the Téke) alias Saigon alias The Man Who Changes Water Into Vodka alias The Legitimate and Direct Heir of Sundiata Keita alias Fancy Footwork alias New Mexico alias Jet Lag alias Schengen Area alias TV5MONDE alias Taxis G7 alias Once A Drunk Always A Drunk alias Parchment alias Long History of The Emperor Mao Zedong alias Birds Hide When They Die alias The Tokyo Stock Exchange. His noble titles reflected the

seasons and the raids on the labyrinthine Polygon of Hope Mine.

They nicknamed him Gold Mine, for example, when he closed a deal with the South Ossetians, Fancy Footwork for his cool, particularly when on chilly terms with the law, New World, or The Most Impresario Yankee, when he floundered about in his English redolent of bottles opened with teeth not far from a broad who'd give you the clap, Ideologue when he recounted with panache his tales of trains that derail with their cargo of narcotics and the whole town helps themselves and the bottom falls out of the market in that particular merchandise and the nightclubs open subsidiary branches thanks to this affair and the students find what they need to get wired during their endless strikes and the diggers refortify their bodies to unearth the biggest-carat diamond and the girls with saggy breasts buy themselves growth hormones or adopt the audacity to look you straight in the eye and jazzmen find the strength to squander jazz and tourists take advantage of the ups and downs to fill their unsatiated bellies and the fatwa hurlers find justification and the itinerant Pentecostal preachers feed their trances and the militiamen grab their guns for the dozenth war of liberation and …

Requiem was still not back.

10:30 P.M. Time to go pray. Pray = worship = sacrifice your organs and your last pennies in honor of the gods of inebriation, of infidelity, of impotence, of debauchery, of fertilization *in vitro*, of fertilization *in the mixed restrooms of Tram 83.* He stood himself up, with difficulty. Damn, another nightmare. He dragged his feet as far as the kitchen. A glass of water. The fridge, empty and dirty. He'd not been told that Requiem lived according to the rhythm of the trains carrying the students and the miners condemned to eat dirt. RULE NUMBER 64: let them play the hardmen, for they paper over society's dregs. RULE

NUMBER 67: the mightier crush the mighty, the mighty defecate in the mouths of the weak, the weak sequestrate the weaker, the weaker do each other in, then split for elsewhere. Hunger crushed him. He hadn’t sunk his teeth into a single thing since leaving the Back-Country. He’d jumped on the first train, with some stale bread, potatoes, a few bananas. The dissident rebels had confiscated it all. (“War effort! We’re hungry, and you’re the grain store!”) As he crossed the living room, he noticed a half-blank page on the table. Requiem had left a few words: “Go munch something, got a mission impossible to complete, speak this evening, explore the town, live!” He stretched out on the couch. An odd smell. The other one, he’d slept here. He turned on the TV to a report about the clash between the students and the diggers in the station whose unfinished metal structure recalled the turbulent years of Leopold II. Entered the bedroom. His rumpled clothes. Pulled out his notebook.

He’d hardly added anything to the text since his journey. Twenty characters, and discharge the text in a few months. Not easy. He’d been keeping up a correspondence with a friend who lived in Paris. The friend was making contacts and had supposedly already secured the approval of a few French theaters, where his text would be staged before making a one-off tour of Brazil, Chile, and Cuba. He should have completed the text four months ago, but circumstances had prevented him from refocusing his characters.

The first version of the manuscript had been burned. In fact, he’d set light to it himself. You think he had a choice, with a Kalashnikov at the back of his neck? They’d paid him a visit during the night and told him, coldly, from under their red berets: “Chuck it over there. Burn it.” He’d resisted fiercely, but with a Kalashnikov at the back of his neck …

A few days after the incident, he received a phone call from his Paris buddy, who resided at Porte de Clignancourt — the neighborhood was a Mecca for impoverished immigrants and other outlaws — to inquire after the progress of the text: “Where are you at with it? It’s vitally important.” He stammered an excuse. In life, it’s a curious virtue to pay for your own mistakes. He’d done it, but paying doesn’t mean finding inspiration and rewriting your own literature, word for word, to the nearest comma. He’d fallen back on his guts for the rewrite, juggling the loss of his daughter with his wife’s illness, but the Clignancourt friend phoned again, fuming, cursing, reminding: “What you playing at, Lucien? I’m in a bind with these French dudes while you sleep in late, nice and easy!” He should have admitted he’d set fire to his stage-tale because a gun had been held to the back of his neck by a guy sporting a red beret, that his daughter had died, and so on and so forth.

A girl accosted him by the elevators.

“What do you think?”

“Nothing.”

“I’m Christelle.”

“Yes …”

“Chris to my friends.”

He was disoriented. The hunger. The fatigue. The heat. The Paris friend, at Porte de Clignancourt, who didn’t stop calling. The characters from his text, for which he’d lost all appreciation. His daydreams. The ruckus of Tram 83. Requiem, in whom he’d placed his trust and who swore only by the New World.

“I love to give head …”

Overtaken by events, he still retained a glimmer of hope and even of beauty. Highbrow. Uncool. Bearded. Unpolished shoes. Straggly hair. Stubbly. Surveys show that eighty percent of girls fall for such individuals. It’s exotic, African, contemporary, New Mexico … Girls increasingly

prefer men with some dodgy baggage, a bulging criminal record, a dubious past, a deal with some Beijing tourists, for example.

“I can make you happy, just say the word.”

There was something prophetic about Requiem. Lucien had already been informed, at the Northern Station, as if in a parable: “The City-State works like this: the girls are emancipated, democratic, and independent. Poverty does away with shame and your courtesies. Here, it’s often the girl, be she baby-chick or the opposite, who takes the initiative. She slips you into her strategy. She looks you straight in the eye. She asks your name. She tells you that you’ve got a great body, that your voice gives her goose pimples. She telephones you, again and again. She clings to you like a leech. But not always from love and other affections. She sticks fast to you because you buy the drinks (given the price of beer at the Tram!), the food (outside of the Tram, itinerant restaurants serving dog-stew, cassava, and smoked rice with onion), and then, after bed, you give her a bit of cash for the work accomplished, transport, and so forth. It’s the girl who tells you the proper procedure when you screw. She manages the whole shebang, from Genesis to the Letter to the Corinthians: ‘Put your leg like this, place your right hand on my belly, ride me like I were your horse, stroke my curves, back, forward, back, forward slowly, stop, now start stroking my hair …’”

“My name, Lucien …”

“You live with the First Man?”

“The First Man, who’s that?”

“Requiem.”

“Since yesterday.”

“Is he your brother? I glimpse a resemblance. He bangs on about his brother who lives and works in Peru.”

The girl had come closer to him, nearly hanging on to his raggedy clothes.

“Peru …”

He smiled.

She pressed her head to his left shoulder.

“Peru …”

“You fit the description.”

Darkness. Christelle gave a little scream. Power cut, commonly called “blackout.” He remained calm, yet concerned.

“My heart told me not to take the elevator. Blackouts compete with the angelus bell and the man in the minaret.”

“…”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Me?”

“You don’t look like an imbecile. History teacher …”

“Ex …”

“Aren’t you ashamed?”

“Why?”

“It’s a waste of energy. We live in the present moment. And what do you do to eat? The students are always on strike and it lasts for years!”

“Do you work?”

The inhabitants of the City-State mumbled when asked about their profession. High voice. Evasive answers. Narrowed eyes. Vague and uncertain look like the trains that depart and return with the diggers and students. “They shit in the train,” added Requiem, almost in tears, as if he were a tourist, or cousin to a tourist.

“Well, am I sussing out a deal?”

“Detective,” he said, ironically.

“Just a good lead.”

Noise throughout the building. The power was back. Christelle, Chris to her friends, took advantage of the situation, and changed the conversation.

“I’m inviting you to our Coupé-Décalé party this Saturday. Are you free?”

“No.”

Downstairs, they went their separate ways, delighted to have made each other's acquaintance.

"You got any dough on you?"

"I'm poor."

"Married?"

"Not so much."

He had somewhat mastered the chapter on "Discussion with a young woman you meet in the elevator." Requiem had given him the code: "Try by any means to remain neutral, cold, and forlorn."

"Do you love me?"

He crossed the street.

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5.

SECOND NIGHT: THE NIGHT WORE HER SWIMSUITS AND UNDERSHIRTS SHE FORGOT TO WRING OUT.

Jalopies out of gas, deep-frozen products from the Galapagos Islands, knickknacks, ceiling fans, oil changes, sheep, sarcastic remarks, hearses on alert, eggs contaminated with melamine, relics, minarets as far as the eye can see, bistros, baker-deli-linen-fish-lumber stores, phone booths, internet cafés, criminal records, pools of stagnant water, garbage bags at the mercy of beggars, stray dogs, no-entry signs, mountains of refuse, black market in the merchandise and its derivatives, discotheques, abandoned locomotives, born-again Christian evangelist churches, cockfights, settlings of scores, boxing galas, mosquitoes resistant to all pesticides, booing, trolleys, wimps bankrolled by mercenaries, Neanderthals, laundries, desires, beverages, arranged widowhoods of wives of soldiers declared missing, ringworms, jeers revised and corrected by the foreign press, daydreams of dissident rebels prepared to open another front because of an oilfield, magic potions to treat unidentified diseases, backwash and backwash, cannibals, bleeders, baby chicks with their “do you have the time?”, idols with feet of clay, smoking rooms, palimpsests, cathedrals, repeat offenders in custody released on bail who return to the scene of the crime with the weapon of the crime, oriental tapestries,

suicidals, the comings and goings of naked-men diddlers, assorted gaffes, superfluities, prolegomena, dark looks, erections paraphrased and channeled into paper tissues … The night came on with her swimsuits and undershirts she forgot to wring out.

All nights have this particularity: they are long and popular.

They teem with the rabble. They stifle awareness and accrue neurosis. They bind a straw mattress and a clock into an unrecognizable muddle. They come from the heart, improvise, and facilitate multiple partnership agreements between foreign bodies.

Lucien walked straight ahead. He crossed two alleyways. He stopped at the Industries traffic circle a moment, to catch his breath. Dashed into the first greasy spoon.

“I’m hungry, sir.”

“What will you have?”

“A piping hot soup, followed by veal kidneys with a bell pepper coulis.”

“Sorry, sir, we do Chinese food here.”

He trembled, just like a kid learning to pick pockets. He had but one concern: to fill his stomach.

“Sorry, sir.”

RULE NUMBER 34: watch out for hunger! Toddlers, barely weaned, have been known to take entire trains hostage, including the merchandise and everything that moved inside and out. Remote cause: the hunger that dissolves any possibility of escape. Direct result: armed robbery with bloodbath.

“One soup, two bowls of rice with any sauce.”

He sat down. They served him the food in a sort of cup.

“Enjoy your meal, sir.”

His throat burst into music with the rhythm of each mouthful. His shirt became spattered with stains, but so what! People stared at him as he wolfed down his food.

“My tip, sir.”

Lucien left the place the same way he’d entered, like a shot. He dove into the darkness in search of an unknown bliss. He was thinking of nothing. He took random streets. Stopped to admire some jugglers.

“Do you have the time?”

He soliloquized. He probed tentatively at the fog of his past. He stepped over the sleepers stretched out on the sidewalk. The city was filled with these boys who held the record for the longest slumber. The kids drugged themselves and thus glided for weeks without seeing the light of day. (A few women ventured to emulate the strategy. They didn’t last long. They were raped. Abused in their long sleep.)

He envied these kids. If only he could arm himself with the courage to do as much! If only he was that young man, covered in muck from head to toe. Maybe he was happier than those people who hide their nervous tension and attempt to take on situations they can no longer handle.

“Do you love me or don’t you?”

The City-State is one of those territories that have already broken through the barrier of internal suffering. You share the same destiny as everyone else, the same history, the same hardship, the same trains, the same rot, the same Tram beer, the same dog kebabs, the same narrative as soon as you come into the world. You start out baby-chick or slim-jim or child soldier. You graduate to endlessly striking student or desperado. If you’ve got family on the trains, then you work on the trains; otherwise, like a ship, you wash up on the edge of hope — a suicidal, a carjacker, a digger with dirty teeth, a mechanic, a street sleeper, a commission agent, an errand boy employed by for-profit tourists, a hawker of secondhand coffins. Your fate is already sealed, the route marked out in advance. Fate sealed like that of the locomotives carrying spoiled merchandise and the dying.

Death holds no meaning since you've never really lived. You cheat life. You devise a life that's bogus. You devise a life on the basis of porn film tapes. It's the only thing you can get hold of easily in the City-State. To escape the monotony, fever, sleeping sickness, earthquakes, cholera, and cave-ins, everyone, with the exception of those who hang out in Tram 83, gets into American porn or Russian porn. Long live globalization! Long live American porn! Long live Russian porn!

"Do you have the time?"

"No."

"Foreplay is important but it kills love to give it too much credit."

He stopped, struck up a conversation with a child who was selling guava at that late hour of the night,

"You a tourist?"

"Why?"

"Because it's tourists who speak kindly to us, and take pictures of us that they go and sell back home."

"I am not …"

"Give me some money."

took a motorcycle taxi, direction: Tram 83.

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6.

MEETING A PUBLISHER SENT FROM HEAVEN IN TRAM 83.

Lucien walked into Tram 83 around three in the morning. Men with multiple pronunciations, always the same. Ditto the single-mamas, shorthand for women. Darkness. A band dispatched from Acapulco was performing a revised and corrected Marvin Gaye opus. The instruments could barely stand. Two strapping lads on drums. Three on attack-vocals. Two hairy fellows on lead guitar. A saxophone. And the band's supremo himself, in braces, complicating the basic vocal quartet (now soprano, now alto, now tenor, now bass and backing vocal). When he raised his voice, a young, almost naked tigress came forward, a strategy to win over the already seduced crowd. Euphoria. And indeed they succeeded in electrifying the room without the slightest effort. Nobody playing court tennis. Nobody playing poker. Nobody playing chess. Nobody bowling. Nobody even in the sanitary facilities. At university, he and Requiem used to implement the same method. Before the show proper, a dessert: either a circus number, or else a quick striptease turn performed by five volunteers. It caused quite a stir. The ecstatic students disrobed, climbed right up on stage and swore by the delights of forbidden fruits. Requiem, who was a good, a very good actor, couldn't stomach the idea of holding out a hand to the audience. "What a waste,"

he cried vehemently, “we came for texts, not for orgiastic sessions of any kind!” Of course this Requiem was of a different tune in his youth, calm, sincere, and loyal. Time makes brutes who wait for just the right moment to draw their pistols. That doesn’t mean Requiem was a brute — a necessary nuance.

“Do you have the time?”

Lucien headed toward the table they’d occupied the previous night. A man, school principal type, past fifty, was already sat there. Alone with his cigarettes and a fine row of bottles, portents of an inveterate alcoholism. When you got wasted, you didn’t return the empties, in order to avoid misunderstandings. The waitresses and busgirls were inclined to tell you ten bottles instead of the three or five you’d actually ordered. No surprise to come across a guy with fifty empty bottles on his table and even the floor.

“Evening, sir. May I sit here?”

Standing before the seemingly very pleasant man.

“As you wish!”

Hardly sat down:

“Where are you from?”

“Vampiretown.”

“And before, I mean, before Vampiretown?”

Lucien stammered. Remembered his friend, Porte de Clignancourt, putting himself through the ordeal of contacting Paris theaters, and he there, in the middle of watching a botched concert. Remembered the girl from the elevators. Remembered that abrupt power cut.

“I just came from the Back-Country.”

The man’s curiosity intensified. Clasped his hands together as if invoking higher deities. A gold bracelet on his left wrist let Lucien guess at his interlocutor’s pecuniary caliber. Behave and maybe he’ll help you get on your feet again, he wondered softly to himself.

“How so?”

“I’m passing through. I don’t know if I’m going to extend my stay.”

“I can see life’s treating you well here.”

He told him this with all the pride of Archimedes discovering his “any body partially or completely submerged in a fluid at rest is acted upon by an upward force equal to the weight of the volume of fluid displaced.”

“Yes, I’m enjoying myself.”

The image of his friend, Porte de Clignancourt, flitted through Lucien’s brain a second time: “I’ve got the Festival des Francophonies en Limousin, the Tarmac and other Paris theaters, the contacts in Brazil. And what about you? Are you enjoying yourself with this guy shooting questions at you?”

He sighed.

“Do you have the time?”

A band from the Amazon, composed of Indians, readied themselves to go on stage. The interrogation continued. The man was surely someone influential. He wanted to know everything and was not to be offended. Who knows, perhaps his future Good Samaritan? Good intentions can be found even in the lion’s den. Each answer stirred his curiosity further.

“Married?”

“…”

“Divorced?”

“No.”

“What line of work are you in?”

He hesitated to go on.

“I hold a bachelor’s degree in history.”

The interlocutor slammed his glass down on the table and erupted into laughter. As if that weren’t enough, he got out of his chair, took a few steps, asked the musicians to lower their voices, and pointed his finger at Lucien:

“Dear friends, you’re not going to believe me: this man you see is a historian!”

General hilarity.

The whole Tram as one:

“Didn’t you give a shit, or what!”

Then as a scattered choir:

“And you earn a living doing history?”

“Look what can happen by dint of imitating the tourists!”

“You study girls too, or just history?”

“You’re an embarrassment to us, with your wallowing in art history!”

“I’ll throw myself onto the tracks if dad insists I study history and stuff,” exclaimed a kid, barely ten years old, who was with his father.

He returned to his table and half mouthed an apology at Lucien, who still didn’t understand what had just befallen him.

“I couldn’t help it. I just didn’t imagine there were any brainy people left in the City-State. This country’s been knocked flat, it’s all got to be rebuilt: roads, schools, hospitals, the station, even men. We need doctors, mechanics, carpenters, and garbage collectors, but certainly not dreamers!”

“Do you have the time?”

The music had resumed with even greater intensity. Lucien had lost the courage to give the man who had just humiliated him a withering look. He did, however, wish to get himself off the hook.

“You can’t do anything about a passion. But I’m not just a historian. I’m also a writer.”

A guy at a neighboring table butted in:

“Writer or historian, same difference.”

“I’m in writing, he insisted.”

“Writing. Writing. Writing.”

His interlocutor pronounced this word in a guttural voice. He remained circumspect, as if victim of an

apparition. Lucien remained on his guard, for fear of being made a fool of a second time.

“I’m a writer but …”

“Young man, you are looking at Ferdinand Malingeau, director of Joy Train Publications.”

Lucien was speechless. He felt a kind of relief. The busgirls and the waitresses balked at bringing them their blasted beer, which, by the way, remained in the mixed facilities — RULE NUMBER 94: reality of life, when you drink, you piss, and when you piss, it remains your beer in your toilet. Lucien recalled Requiem’s “I prefer to piss at home.” He wanted to order a beer but not a single pair of eyes fell on him. It required the direct intervention of Joy Train Publications to resolve the situation. Finally, the first beer. The busgirl came over, vexed. Slammed the drink down. Stood back, bottle-opener in hand. Several seconds. Made up her mind, and opened the merchandise. A single verse:

“Tip!”

Lucien took out a bill.

“Here.”

She snatched the money and turned her back without a word. The traffic grew thicker. Our Indian friends, performing an anthem against global warming, child labor in the mines, deforestation, and the poaching of tilapia, pythons, piranhas, and white rhinoceroses, sowed panic among the common people. The women dissolved into tears. The men — tourists and other dropouts taken unawares by the sad saga of existence — shook their heads in repentance.

Lucien swiveled his head in the hope of glimpsing Requiem.

“How long you been in the writing game?”

“Do you have the time?”

“Ten years.”

“What or who do you write about? Got a target audience? Expectations? How many copies? Any literary prizes? What genre?”

He felt trapped. Questions shooting from all sides. He hadn’t even taken a sip!

“Anything you’re working on?”

He had to answer in the hope of getting published by Joy Train.

“Let’s just say a stage-tale that considers this country from a historical perspective. *The Africa of Possibility: Lumumba, the Fall of an Angel, or the Pestle-Mortar Years*. It is highly likely that this text will be performed in Europe. Characters include Che Guevara, Sékou Touré, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Lumumba, Martin Luther King, Ceauşescu, not forgetting the dissident General.”

The publisher ordered a glass of rum and some ice cubes. Comings and goings to the restrooms: single-mamas, baby-chicks, students, office workers, tourists, musicians, Pentecostal preachers, jugglers, ex-convicts …

“I’m no communist. I don’t buy it. I know Lumumba is an emblematic figure of the independence of Congo-Zaire, but I feel that instead of Lumumba it’s best to depict our own heroes, such as a resistance fighter who paid the price for this city, instead of getting bogged down in the history of Congo-Zaire. And as for ‘The Congo for the Congolese,’ leave that part of history to the dramatists of this country! Here, as in the Back-Country, there are surely men who have left a mark on their era. Leave these great men to their dignified repose! Turn your mind to texts that talk of railroads, mines, or I don’t know what.”

“Let me explain …”

“Otherwise you restrict yourself to churning out an essay instead of blending genres.”

“I trained as a historian. I think, unless I am mistaken, that literature deserves pride of place in the shaping of history. It is by way of literature that I can reestablish the

truth. I intend to piece together the memory of a country that exists only on paper. To fantasize about the City-State and the Back-Country with a view to exploring collective memory. Historical characters are my waymarks. But baby-chicks, diggers, famished students, tourists, and …"

"I'm familiar with that view of things. We've already had enough of squalor, poverty, syphilis, and violence in African literature. Look around us. There are beautiful girls, good-looking men, Brazza Beer, good music. Doesn't all that inspire you? I'm concerned for the future of African literature in general. The main character in the African novel is always single, neurotic, perverse, depressive, childless, homeless, and overburdened with debt. Here, we live, we fuck, we're happy. There needs to be fucking in African literature too!"

Lucien made the most of his interlocutor's fervor to guzzle his first suds. As he raised his glass, he noticed the two girls from yesterday who were eyeing them up from afar. He attempted a friendly gesture, poor thing. The single-mamas took the gesture for a code, and came down to them without waiting to be asked twice.

"I'm interested in your stage-tale."

The Amazonians left by the back door, having been begged by the busgirls, the diggers, the Pentecostal preachers, and the rest of the audience, who'd just wiped away their crocodile tears, to vacate the stage.

"You're a handsome pair. Good evening, for starters."

The two girls got settled. A rap group set to blazing up the joint. The rappers, a cantankerous and disreputable bunch of ex-students, ex-rebels, and ex-diggers, screamed, barked, moaned, haggled, and jabbered.

"I'm going to organize a rehearsed reading. Joy Train Publications is honored to present … what was the name of your stage-tale again?"

"*The Africa of Possibility: Lumumba, the Fall of an Angel, or the Pestle-Mortar Years.*"

“On this magnificent evening, Joy Train Publications are deeply honored and truly pleased to give you Lucien, a contemporary author whose work teaches us to overcome walls, train tracks, wars, and oceans, and which we shall publish one of these fine days.”

“You know …”

“I am Swiss, by my father and mother. Anyhow, you’d have found out sooner or later. I prefer to tell you this before any collaboration. To avoid possible confusion. All these whites you see here are not necessarily Swiss.”

Dreamily, craning his neck forward slightly, the man continued, in a hoarse voice like someone in a restroom stall who doesn’t want to be disturbed:

“Some are even more African than you people. I mean to say, they love Africa.”

The pair of young ladies glared at each other, as did the busgirls and the waitresses. They possessed the same desires, the same powers, the same liberations, the same ardors, the same jealousies. The far-fetched rumors knocking about Transition Street, Sovereign National Conference Street, and Democratization Street confirmed the hypotheses according to which many men perished in the clashes of 1990, while others joined the military. Result: more women than men, over whom the girls with eggplant-breasts, the busgirls, and the waitresses fought tooth and nail.

“Do you have the time?”

The publisher questioned. The publisher recounted. The publisher explained. Lucien, who already saw himself on the shelves of a library, didn’t even sip his beer. He got out his notebook, wrote his rubbish.

“How did you guess I’m not from around here?”

“Very easily. Evening, sir. May I sit here? And then the tip you gave the girl. In here, you just plump your ass down. Period!”

“You seem absorbed by your interview!”

“These girls friends of yours?”

They introduced themselves, brusquely.

The rappers continued their ranting.

“Do you have the time?”

The chitchat continued for quite a while. The two girls, who pulled all sorts of faces, quieted down. “Hot water always cools in the end,” as Requiem said, quoting a Zairian musician. RULE NUMBER 17: don’t lose your nerve in front of our girls, they’ve got no alternative but to grovel; the latest statistics confirm what we all know: there are more girls than us, fancy footwork, fancy footwork, fancy footwork. Malingeau bowed out with the carnival. Every Saturday, the Brazilian tourists improvised a carnival that visited the liveliest spots of the City-State.

“I love the carnival! Monday, same time, to talk about your reading, and doubtless the publication.”

“Do you have the time?”

Meanwhile, the musicians of the International Congo Society, with their dreadlocks, polished shoes, colorful suits, mechanical gestures, and broken French. Lucien stayed with the girls, discussing love, the songs hummed by the guys whose backs buckled as they built the railroads, baby-chicks, miners trapped by cave-ins, easy money, New Mexico, Los Angeles, Dallas, Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Lagos … His tiredness, his nausea, his worries had disappeared. The publisher embodied hope, the start of something. The two single-mamas congratulated him on his show that was now in sight. Astrid escorted a feller who had bawled his eyes out as the Amazonians moaned on. He and Émilienne crossed the train tracks, all loved up, and made their way along the main road to Vampiretown, groping each other as they went. If bliss had a name, it would be called Tram 83.

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7.

STRATEGY MEANS RESOLVING A GIVEN SITUATION INTELLIGENTLY.

Out front of the building, a salsa atmosphere reigned. Young women in bloom badmouthing Christelle. Kids playing hopscotch. Teenage boys recounting their first sexual experiences in whispered tones. Dogs, cats, chickens, wandering goats. There is nothing bad whatsoever about relentlessly pursuing a baby-chick or playing hopscotch or chatting between buddies. But doing it at three in the morning denotes amateurism for people supposed to wake at four so as not to miss the one and only train that crosses the City-State. He walked past them with the girl. They haughtily expected a greeting from him. There's no age for arrogance. Lucien blurted out "morning" and "evening" to several, but they did not reply. Lucien had hardly been expecting a warm welcome. If he'd made the first move, it was merely as a formality. But the kids sulked because they'd detected from his nonchalance that he wasn't from around here. They couldn't tolerate a guy showing up at the building with girls, when half the building's population was composed of girls waiting — like one waits for Christ, pointed out Requiem — for a gentleman suitor.

Light in the apartment. Requiem was already back. He lay, convulsing, on the couch, complaining of awful pains in

his abdomen. He groaned, voice hoarse from getting plastered or from arguing with the diggers he employed. Between two grimaces, Requiem, known as The Negus, looked Émilienne up and down.

“Your day?”

“Good. Very good, actually. I met a publisher.”

“A publisher?”

“A certain Ferdinand Malingeau.”

“That bastard!”

“You know him?”

“Maybe.”

Lucien and Émilienne wanted to enter the bedroom. But Requiem was finagling. By dint of climbing aboard those wretched trains, man becomes an animal, thinking only of satisfying the pleasures of the underbelly.

“Hey, Lucien.”

Requiem writhed about for a good while longer, his eyes fixed on the little haversack that never left him. To his great despair, Lucien knew nothing about either the contents or the precise significance of the hunting-bag. “This bag is a fragmentation bomb,” sniggered the Negus. In his moments of hysteria, the Negus was fond of saying that his haversack imbued him with the power to reinvent the system. He wasn’t going to stop, now that things were going so well. That would be to misjudge him. He made some fortuitous comparisons with Moses’ staff. The baby-chicks said that Requiem’s haversack was stuffed with pictures of naked tourists.

“Can you go get me a can of beer? My head’s killing me.”

He rolled his eyes shriveled up by the dust that covered Hope Mine.

“Which beer?”

“Any.”

Lucien went out.

He had no idea what the Negus was up to. The elevators had stopped working. He tore down the stairs, braved the wild-eyed gaze of the young women from the building who were commiserating with Christelle and cursing those bastards who brought girls back to the building even though the building was swarming with girls of all ages, found a store, climbed back up the stairs, not without difficulty since he had to shake off Christelle, whom he ran into in the stairwell and who spun him a tired tale.

“You know you have your own particular way of viewing life.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Do you love me?”

He had to be rid of her as quickly as possible.

“Maybe.”

He sensed something bad. A long feeling of fear and sadness. Perhaps Requiem was breathing his last. He reached his terminus, exhausted by the errand. Requiem had underestimated his adversary. He said he’d take fifteen minutes, but Lucien had done the essential in a few fractions of a second. He pushed open the door. Nobody in the living room. He heard a sort of noise drifting from the bedroom. He walked to the door, put his ear right up to the doorframe then looked through the keyhole. Requiem and Émilienne, inverted on the bed, which was creaking in a decrescendo. Lucien went back out with the beer, poured it down the stairs, cursed the day he was born, and set off down a little street at random, alone and feeble.

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8.

UNFAIR COMPETITION: YOUR NEIGHBOR SELLS DOUGHNUTS; YOU ALSO START SELLING DOUGHNUTS; YOU EVEN DABBLE WITH BLACK MAGIC TO NAB ALL HIS CUSTOMERS.

Two days after the incident, Lucien came across Émilienne, who was waiting for him with open arms as if nothing had happened.

“Why?”

“I thought you’d intercepted the signals.”

“You shouldn’t have given in.”

“You left me alone with him.”

“Well, you’re not my wife, after all.”

They sat down. The dozing waitresses began to put on their makeup.

Unfair competition.

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9.

TRAM 83: BY DAY AS BY NIGHT, ETERNAL IN ITS SPLENDOR OF A PARADISE GOING TO HELL IN A HANDCART, WITH THE CRUMMIEST CUSTOMERS AND THOSE WHO CHUCK THEIR FORTUNE OUT THE WINDOW, SYMBOL OF A SOCIETY IN PERFECT HARMONY, INTERMIXED, INTERMINGLED, CARTE BLANCHE TO MENDELIAN CROSSBREEDING, FORCED INFATUATIONS, PREMATURE EJACULATIONS.

The reading-appearance called “Prophecies from Before Dawn” was set for a Saturday night around eleven. The guy entrusted with raising awareness of the benefits of literature entrusted it to another guy who entrusted it to another guy who entrusted it to another — suffice to say, it was the shoddiest sort of awareness-raising. The audience, who had not received the lowdown on this event, took Tram 83 by storm as was their custom.

The evening commenced gloomily, following the cave-in of an underground gallery in a diamond mine. The news spread by word of mouth. Everyone knew the diggers who’d just been engulfed by the earth. All fifteen of them would end their day, which started with the crow of the cock, the angelus bell, or the fatwa from the minaret opposite, by rushing aboard the train, snubbing the students, and fetching up at the Tram, where they would clink glasses, entice the single-mamas, head off in

foursomes to make love in the mixed facilities, sweat like pigs, burst into laughter, insult the busgirls, dance the polka, peddle bad news around, converse with the tourists, smoke ganja, masturbate openly, buy everyone a round, battle each other at Russian roulette, bark out songs their grandfathers and great-grandfathers would strike up while digging out the same mines, carting around pneumonia and other yet-to-be-classified diseases, share dog kebabs, start fights, have a go at the musicians, and split the same way they showed up, dirty, irascible, cocky, ebullient, and contemptuous. They spread havoc but were cherished all the same. The rumors grew increasingly confused, giving way to an indescribable muddle. According to reliable sources, they'd been searching through gravel, found a concentrated diamond deposit, and followed the beast without covering their asses. It had happened late morning. Six bodies had been retrieved from the rubble, including that of Boubacar, Boubacar who threatened to hang himself each time his mother forbade him to head down the hole. Boubacar had escaped more than eight cave-ins. The last but one earned him the nickname Lazarus. According to the talk in Tram 83, Boubacar had emerged unscathed from a cave-in that had taken a huge number of human lives. The same talk related how he had apparently eaten the raw flesh of his colleagues who had died on the spot. They'd been entombed for four days and four nights, and Lazarus was the only one to emerge from the filth. One hundred and fifty-six people perished, including the baby-chicks and slim-jims who'd gone down to lend a hand. Baby-chicks are girls aged twelve to fifteen who prostitute themselves in the quarries, walk in single file, and don't hesitate to band together and alert the soldiers should a customer refuse to pay the agreed rate. The slim-jims are barely adolescent boys who toil as casual laborers: extracting, carrying, and washing the gravel to separate out the diamond crystals.

It was the month of December. This explained everything, as cave-ins quintupled as Christmas approached. “The witch doctors set traps to get meat to gorge on and blood to guzzle during the end-of-year festivities,” summarized the Negus, his hand down his pants. The fifteen deceased were operating fraudulently in the Polygon of Hope Mine. The dissident General didn’t authorize anyone to excavate except for tourists, his biological family, and his closest associates. He had proclaimed himself “Father of the Nation.” He rejoiced at these cave-ins, which he blamed on divine sanction against us his children who transgressed the word of the “Father.” Truth be told, the whole of the City-State rejoiced when the earth devoured. Cave-ins cause considerable damage but allow the stone to grow, whispered the sages of Tram 83. In the days following a cave-in, the stones could be gathered everywhere, from the Tram to the station whose metal structure… and from the brothels to the Cuba Club.

Outside, baby-chick poetry.

“You are my prince charming, I feel like cuddling you, I’m super horny, randy as hell, take me by the arm and let’s travel far away from here, to Perugia, I want to see Nantes, that old slaving port, for I’m your slave, chain me up for life, take me by the arms, let’s go, I want to see the port of Marseille …”

The tension ratcheted up every ten minutes. Bottles were deflowered by the dozen to drown the bitterness and disgust at living in a rotten world. The single-mamas positioned themselves to get a good view of the clients. The students tackled the latest news by the light of Marx and Engels.

“Do you have the time?”

The waitresses and the busgirls demanded their tips with the penknives they dug out of their brassieres. The slim-jims and the baby-chicks lent their services. Comings and goings throughout the Tram.

An overexcited Pentecostal preacher announced the construction of a railroad that would link the City-State with Northern Ireland and serve to transport the stones and many other types of merchandise. All conversations ended with train tracks and the discovery of a mineral deposit. The tourists suggested a peaceful march. Everyone invented a kinship with the deceased. The fact that it was they who had attempted to burn down the Tram on three occasions was quite forgotten.

“Foreplay depends on the tourist, in my view. Is he good-looking? Does he have money? Does he buy rounds of beer for his friends? Does he eat dog cutlets?”

The audience expected nothing but music. But the guy entrusted with soothing the doubts of this overly capricious clientele was himself finding it hard to stomach a reading at Tram 83. To entertain the raging crowd, he summoned a band to perform a few deep-frozen classics from the Cuban revolution. The audience learned that he himself had traveled from Cuba to fight alongside the Ethiopian army during the Ogaden War. The final song rattled on about the Cuban-Ethiopian offensive of early February 1977, followed by a second, unexpected offensive in which the musicians and he had taken part. The audience learned that after these hostilities, they had stayed a while in Somalia, a country they had attacked two years earlier. And then the rush triggered by the mines had driven them to cram aboard the first train departing for the City-State.

Lucien arrived a quarter of an hour before the show, and entered via the back door, fear knotting his stomach. “They are not here to savor your poetry.” — He received a faceful of advice courtesy of the Tram’s owner — “Emotions are running very high at the moment, you know, what with the cave-ins. They’ll be looking to drag you onto the rails. Prepare yourself for the worst. Our only concern is that they fuck and get drunk like they’re used to. You’re on your own.” Jammed into in a brightly colored jacket, the

publisher chortled his cheeriest laugh. It was his first reading since he'd arrived here from a speck of land in the pacific oceans, they whispered in the mixed restrooms. His right hand resting on Lucien's shoulder, he rambled on about his passion for the trains serving the City-State.

The minutes crumbled away. The bards of the Revolution (who were resigning themselves to not leaving the stage) started playing their same repertoire all over again. The audience, who knew every song by heart, showed their enthusiasm. Requiem, sandwiched between two baby-chicks, cheered the resistance. The publisher, the police officers dispatched for the occasion, and Lucien himself, who promised to read just a quarter of the text, debated endlessly. Following the cave-in, suggestions that the city be put to the sack fed every conversation. The comings and goings to the facilities increased significantly. The single-mama-chicks cast their nets and hooks into the crowd. The waitresses, the busgirls, and a few single-mamas too sure of themselves glowered at each other.

"Foreplay is not essential."

"I don't like banks. That's just my opinion."

"Do you have the time?"

Meanwhile, he feverishly scribbled a few lines in his notebook: "They think only of satisfying their belly and their underbelly. The dogs bark, the trains loaded with gold bars move on. They'll wake up one morning and realize the City-State no longer exists. The City-State will be a distant memory, the vestige of a … Even now, the City-State exists only in name. The heavens belong to the higher deities and the earth to the tourists and the dissident General as they excavate without breaking a sweat. What will they do when they no longer have their country and their minerals that sprout like wild mushrooms?"

It was not until two in the morning that they succeeded in convincing the assembled company of the necessity of literature in a nightclub.

“Do you have the time?”

The publisher introduced the event, championing this writer he had discovered in “the wreckage of this city that is losing its greenery when it would be better off opting for a behavior worthy of a modern city. Lucien is a supremely talented author. For the sake of the future, your future, back this man, invest in him.”

Lucien stepped forward to take the floor. He remembered his last time on stage: Back-Country, applause. That show had later cost him a seventeen-month suspended sentence, with a two-year ban on practicing a profession, for aggravated assault, breaching national security, and planned and systematic incitement to revolt. He extracted his texts from a portfolio. He took a serious stance. He opened the ball after having requested a minute’s silence in memory of the victims. He was trembling like a dead leaf. He emphasized certain words, raised his voice. He hadn’t counted on the audience trying to trip him up. One minute too many, one sentence out of place, and he’d find out what they were made of. Which wasn’t long in happening, as the imprecations began to rend the heavens.

The whole Tram as one:

“Get off, Lucien!”

Then as a scattered choir:

“Don’t you preach at us!”

“You’re hot, I want you!”

“Alligator!”

“Show-off!”

He was determined to complete his reading. He clung to his words. He fixed his gaze elsewhere. He held fast to a childhood memory. He thought about his friend, Porte de Clignancourt. He transcended himself. He skipped certain paragraphs. He was even tempted to procure some relief in the mixed restrooms.

“Have you ever looked at yourself in the mirror!”

Back at university, he'd been told: "If you have difficulty concentrating, imagine yourself on a cot with an outrageously well-stacked girl, curves in all the right places, who begs you to thrust your cock into her. Hold, hold, hold fast to that idea, for God's sake, and that's maybe where you'll find salvation." He imagined himself with a buxom creature on Requiem's divan. The abuse crescendoed. The Tram, the whole Tram as one, then disjointed voices, then as one, then disjointed voices, then as one …

Requiem laughed until he cried. Quite normal, considering the animosity that bound the two bastards close. The publisher, at a loss to know what to do, stoically downed his vodka. Seized with pity, the busgirls and the waitresses enjoined him to beat it. The single-mamas took advantage of this incident to break ranks, push through the crowd to hunt down a potential client, entice others, or go change — either in the mixed facilities, or in the darkest corners of the room. No harm in a little digression: the girls arrived wearing dignified attire which they modified as the night drew on, or according to the mood of the clientele, in such a way that they appeared almost naked at strategic times, three in the morning, say, or four. The guys who'd been singing up the Cuban revolution bluntly began retuning their instruments. But Lucien held out, raising his voice above the din.

"Do you have the time?"

"You're cute!"

"Do you have the time?"

"Come sleep with me!"

A digger smashed a bottle and overturned a table in protest. The dogs bark, the trains move on. Lucien had corralled himself for good. He continued to read. The baby-chicks swayed their booties over to the mixed facilities. The students, initially friendly, suggested he lay down his arms. The single-mama-chicks washed their dirty linen, not in

public, but with the mother superior, the den mama of the waitresses and busgirls. A young man sweetly left his seat, stepped up on the stage, and let fly with a left uppercut. An unusually violent punch. Lucien tottered, crashed to the floor. He remembered his third dream. He was giving a geography lesson to some pupils dressed all in green who asked him to go polish his shoes with condom lubricant. He persisted, and carried on reading them an article about cumulonimbi until a pupil stood up, gave him a thrashing, and ordered him to get back to the Northern Station, and jump aboard the first train for the Back-Country … The pages of his text lay on the stage. He made a superhuman effort, and stood himself up. A right this time. Bursts of applause.

"Another beating, teach him he's not here to show off!"

The publisher tried to intervene. A slap despite his boss-man appearance. "That'll learn you to respect guys who've really experienced life," the attacker had said. The euphoria of a train entering the station. The jubilant shouts of the survivors of another cave-in. The jabbering of the slim-jims. They set to parodying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (for whites). The students carried him by the sleeves and threw him outside. Émilienne sobbed.

Requiem headed toward the mixed facilities.

Outside, they continued to manhandle him. Someone picked up a tire. Someone suggested he be burned alive. Someone said he was a spy, a police inspector, a secret agent, friend of the for-profit tourists. A girl with breasts wrinkled like socks even accused him of attempted rape one Thursday evening when she was strutting about not far from the railroad tracks. They continued to manhandle him. In the distance, the angelus bell, the fatwa from the minaret, the shrieks of a student gone mad from having used black magic to further his aim of resembling the tourists used to paying everyone a round. Blood, drool, tears, surely he'd just lost his legs in trying to grab ahold of

a freight train! They continued to manhandle him, hauling him across the rails.

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10.

REQUIEM, MY MERCHANDISE IS SACRED.

The beating he'd received outside of his performance at Tram 83 had confined him to bed. Seventeen stitches by the doctors' count. Lucien momentarily halted the writing of his stage-tale. The ambitions he entertained disappeared with every passing nightmare. Headless men appeared, advising he climb aboard the first train or risk ending up in the morgue, his guts exposed, his eyes scraped out. The texts just couldn't make any headway in such a climate. He no longer felt the pertinence of Che's lines, or even Gandhi's in negotiations with George Bush Junior, tableau 10, entitled "Baghdad Boogie And Other Lives To Come." The dramatist's drama remains the distractedness of the characters on whom the plot depends.

"Requiem, my merchandise, don't you dare try and stiff me, or you'll see what I'm really capable of!"

His day had got off to a bad start. Four dreams he'd had, the first two in the morning and the other two in the afternoon, common denominator: a railroad without tracks, miners engulfed, cherry-popped baby-chicks, and students wasted away by the strike, for-profit tourists heading back home, the busgirl with the fat lips stabbed by a mercenary … From the very first dream, he had a foreboding that something bad was going to happen to him.

He hung up without saying a word. He closed the shutters. He picked up a volume lying on a shelf of the small bookcase. Buried his nose in it.

Another phone call.

“Requiem, my merchandise is sacred!”

Ever since he’d been bed-bound, he regularly received calls for the Negus laden with death threats. He had even gotten adjusted to this rain of blackmail that fell every half hour. He hung up, returned to the publication. 7:16 P.M. Another phone call. He continued his reading. The telephone was insistent. He hesitated, then picked up the receiver, exhausted by these gymnastics.

“Good evening, Ferdinand Malingeau. May I speak with Mr. Lucien?”

“What do you want with me?”

He answered, after rather a long silence:

“Yes, Mister Lucien, I must first of all beseech your forgiveness for the other evening. Your friend gave me to understand that you were going through a bad patch and needed a little more money.”

“So?”

“I am still interested in your literature and I would like to meet to discuss things.”

“Can you leave me the hell alone?”

“Sir … It is for your benefit. Your friend told me all about the difficulties you’re currently experiencing. I thought, after the five thousand dollars, to come to your aid again.”

“What five thousand dollars?”

He was dumbstruck.

“The five thousand I gave to your friend as compensation!”

He was speechless.

“Do you have any other texts?”

Five thousand dollars, damn that Requiem! He shook with rage.

“Can you hear me, sir, see you at the Tram at 11 P.M. at the latest?”

“That’s perfect.”

He collapsed onto the couch. The phone rang:

“Hi, Lucien, Requiem here, I won’t be back this evening.”

For the past week, Requiem had been ringing to apologize for not being able to come home, on the pretext of some deal to tie up.

“Ok.”

“Hi, Lucien, what’s with you, my blood brother?”

“Nothing.”

He hung up surreptitiously for fear of uttering some idiocy. He nodded off.

The phone rang:

“Requiem, my merchandise or nothing, it’s a matter of life or death …”

He suddenly had a crazy idea. A leap into the void. He thought of Jacqueline, and replied without mincing his words:

“Requiem, my merchandise, Requiem, my merchandise, shut it!”

He got back to his reading. 7:47 P.M. He stood up, took the only beer sitting in the fridge, went out, his imitation-leather bag under his arm, and tried the broken-down elevators.

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11.

IF EVERYONE WERE LIKE REQUIEM, THERE WOULD NEVER BE ANY POVERTY. HE KNEW WHERE AND PRECISELY WHEN TO STRIKE. WHETHER HE RETURNED WITH A CRIPPLED LEG AND A RIPPED EAR, HE SET OFF AGAIN THE FOLLOWING MORNING, HEAD HELD HIGH: REQUIEM, FOR AN IDENTITY REGAINED.

Requiem brought Lucien ten newspapers a week. He went without his smokes to provide him with “food for the mind,” as he liked to banter. Lucien was terribly ashamed when he saw him reach into his haversack and pull, from between two sandwiches, the newspapers he triumphantly handed him like a poker player laying down his last cards. Lucien paid no mind to the joy Requiem procured from this humanitarian service, but, over time, the Negus started to go too far. He used his actorly qualities against him. His little performance was mechanical, yet not without purpose: that Lucien would tire and eventually move out!

Requiem often returned home around 11 P.M., sometimes even later, much later, pushed open the door with his left foot, leered at him, greeted him, set down his near-sighted glasses, questioned him about the health of his characters, wanted to know if Lucien had got himself something to eat, if Lucien actually read the ads, took off his grubby vest, his scuffed kicks, his socks, and trained his little eyes on him for a long while before continuing with

the stage that tortured him the most. With a writer's sensibility, Lucien grasped the four sequences of his choreography:

1) Arrival of the angel, heaven is lower than earth.
2) Undressing as the stage preceding creation.
3) Trial by ordeal or the survival instinct of a sleepwalking, lazy, wretched king.
4) Assassination and the bagging-up of my bones.

It was this last sequence that finished him. Picking up his Pandora's box, or haversack, Requiem set it right down on the dining-room table. He mastered Lucien's psychology as he did that of his prostitutes. He heckled him: "You writers, I wonder what you write about!" When Lucien attempted to escape to the sanitary facilities or the kitchen, he rushed after him, pursuing the interrogation, blow by blow, about what was afoot in the Back-Country, while extracting from his chow bag the newspapers he triumphantly handed him with a sarcastic air, insinuating every thirty seconds that Lucien didn't read the ads, all the new ones.

"RULE NUMBER 74: this is how you snag a job here, you sniff out the ads, you phone and they hire you, no pity for centipedes like you who twiddle their thumbs. Me here, Requiem, I hate jerks who don't want to find work."

As his temper flared, Requiem stood there like a foreign-language teacher, reading aloud to him the ads he thought suited his profile:

Waiter or waitress:
to work every day of the week except Saturday and Sunday.
Work attire is compulsory: pants or skirt, white blouse,
black jacket.

He piled it on: "You gotta grab any opportunity, jobs are fought over, it's another world here, New Mexico, fall

asleep and they'll fall on you!" Continued in a neutral tone: "Gotta know how to land on your feet anyplace, there's not just your literature can earn you a crust, statistics prove in black and white that these days studies only serve to boost your pride. And you know what? It's you intellectuals who've wrecked this country!"

Requiem was loath to spruce up his studio apartment since Lucien would be the prime beneficiary. He left home early in the morning and returned only late at night, head held high, chest puffed out, pants up over his bellybutton. Then skedaddled that same night to deliver some merchandise or sling back the booze at Tram 83. Requiem knew that Lucien suspected him of being mixed up in shady dealings. He knew that Lucien was not unaware that he purposefully kept his kennel in a pitiful state.

"We're never at home, what point is there in us getting any furniture," he said every thirty seconds.

It wasn't for lack of money.

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12.

HAWKERS OF SECONDHAND COFFINS.

In the time it took to reach the stairs, a thud, blackout. He hurried down. The young boys of the building took advantage of such circumstances to dump in the stairwell. Vigilance and perceptiveness were required, or else risk tramping through waste. RULE NUMBER 25, as reiterated by the Negus: the stairwells of New Mexico sometimes serve as public latrines.

“My arm, my arm.”

He had stumbled during his frantic dash, and fallen on his left hand, which was barely healed. He picked himself up, furtively gathered his texts, tiptoed downstairs, and knocked shoulders with the girls on the fourth floor who were blocking the way.

“Do you have the time?”

Outside, no decent lighting of any kind. He hesitated to take shortcuts, for fear of running into a gang of hoods. Requiem had been walking down Authenticity Street one day when he fell into the clutches of some armed men, who snatched both his merchandise and his clothes. He’d managed to get back to Vampiretown thanks to a single-mama-chick who’d lent him her spare dress.

People used to have power twenty-four-seven, before companies started sprouting like mushrooms. The term “blackout” didn’t appear in the dictionary. People were not

dependent upon electricity. Then came the rush, the for-profit tourists, and their companies excavating for raw materials. Then the rebellions and mutinies. The first talk of blackouts appeared around the 1990s. Buoyed up by his victories over the regular army, the rebel leader of the time, half-brother of the dissident General, key shareholder in some seventy-six firms, and brother-in-law of an investor renowned for his largesse, burst onto the airwaves and declared: “You will receive power four days a week, to ensure that businesses can operate at full tilt.” As time passed, he adjusted his decree to two days, then one, then two hours, reasoning that the processing plants for the minerals so dear to the tourists require more electrical power, that the inhabitants of the City-State don’t have much need for it, and that the machinery meant to be supplying this power is rusting under the weight of the years: it dates from the building of the station, which is essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that call to mind the railroad built by Stanley. Lucien strode along Independence Street. He took the curve of International Armistice Street, then turned onto Gravedigger Street in spite of himself, but avoided venturing too far down this narrow thoroughfare. Two men approached him, beaming.

“What size would you like, sir?”

The little street was full of commission agents, hired mourners, gravediggers, and hawkers of first and second-foot coffins.

“My condolences, sir, is it your daughter who’s just …”

They laid out their wares on either side amid unrivaled pandemonium. Their trade drew so-called businesswomen who erected straw shacks from which they slung grub, hemp, and traditional beer, which in turn drew musicians, baby-chicks, itinerant Pentecostal preachers and other rubberneckers of that ilk, open-air concerts, striptease

shows, and simulated orgasms and fellatio, as the chronology would have it.

“How old was he when he passed?”

Their strategy was to welcome with open arms, to commiserate with the potential client, to explain that they were there to cry with him, to pass themselves off as a friend, to suggest a product.

“Ebony wood, negotiable …”

A horde of kids ran after him.

“Sir, we work for less.”

Eyes shriveled by cigarettes and alcohol. Potbellies full to bursting with roundworms, amoebas, earthworms, and assorted mollusks. Heads shaved with knives. Arms and legs stiff with digging graves from morning till morning. They were close to ten, maybe twelve years old. They toted the same justifications: “We’re doing this to pay for our studies. Dad’s already gone with the locomotives. He doesn’t write no more. Mom’s sick. The uncles and aunts and grandmothers say we’re sorcerers and it’s because of us that dad got married a third time and that our sorcery comes from mom and that we should go see the preachers who will cut the links by getting us to swallow palm oil to make us vomit up our sorcery and prevent us flying around at night.” They lived off a multitude of rackets, like all the kids in town.

“We’re not expensive. Our condolences first!”

They worked as porters at the Northern Station, and on the Congo River and at the Central Market, as slim-jims in the mines, errand boys at Tram 83, undertakers, and gravediggers. The more sensitive ones stood guard at the greasy spoons abutting the station, whose metal structure recalled the 1885s, in exchange for a bowl of badly boiled beans.

He stopped, got out his notebook, wrote: “Childhood, zero to two years old. Puberty, three to seven years old. Adolescence, eight to twelve years old. At fifteen, you

already start scribbling your will.” “There’s no shortage of dead,” Requiem was fond of saying; he who regularly traded his merchandise for coffins he sold on to tourists when they lost their workers in cave-ins. Lucien felt bad when he saw those poor faces ready to do anything to survive. RULE NUMBER 23: every day is a pitched battle. As soon as dawn breaks you wonder what you’re going to eat, and then, with the sun, you reintegrate the cycle of the City-State, you fish, you dig, you scavenge, you glean, you devise, you fuck, you sweat, you sell, you trade, you peddle, you abuse, you corrupt, you drink, you shit in the stairwell, you identify with the jazz, you taunt the white tourists. Everything can be liquidated, each devises their own system. He thought about his Clignancourt friend: “I’m making contacts with all the theaters, and you, you wander about in the open air, how’s that a way to live, Lucien!” He thought of Gandhi’s face at Karl Marx’s commentary on the expropriation of the rural population. He thought about the Negus justifying himself: “Life expectancy here is forty-one years, whether you like it or not! I’m filling the four years I’ve got left as I see fit.” He stared at the coffins, on either side. Wrote in his notebook: deaths corresponding to professions.

MINERS	Cave-ins
OR DIGGERS,	Suicide (hanging, overdose, etc.)
IT DEPENDS	Radioactivity
	Drugs or traditional alcohol
	Vendetta
	Sexually transmitted diseases
BABY-CHICKS	Abortion
	Childbirth

	Rape
	Pneumonia
	Sequestration
	Sexually transmitted diseases

He remembered the article he'd read the previous day. On the front page, a ten-year old girl gives birth to a child weighing twenty-one pounds; the father of the newborn, a thirty-year-old digger carried off by the cave-in before last.

SLIM-JIMS	Cave-ins
	Radioactivity
	Roundworm
	Sexually transmitted diseases
STUDENTS	Mown down by trains
	Suicide
	Poisoning for those who try to show off
	Clashes with the miners
	(Hunger) strike
	Sexually transmitted diseases
SINGLE-MAMAS	Bad luck
	Sexually transmitted diseases

"I'm horny, take me far away from here, far from these vipers, and turn me on."

"Missionary position or doggy-style, I'm ready to do the freakiest stuff."

“I don’t have syphilis, that’s the only good news.”

He turned the page and scrawled: “They’ve lost their knowledge of hoe and fishhook. What will they sink their teeth into when the earth, for all its copper and diamonds, rejects them. Flashes of lightning initial the myths long maintained by these railroads that haunt the most wounded imaginations, the desire to see that other part of oneself sinking ever further.” He was reminded of his third dream: heavily bearded kids insisting he either pay them to dig his own grave or else flee aboard the first train for the Back-Country …

“Do you have the time?”

“I don’t like banks. That’s just my opinion.”

“I give marvelous head.”

“Let’s go far away from here. Take me to Graz, or Moscow even. Yes, I love your country.”

He crossed a nameless street, lit a cigarette, Tram 83 in the distance.

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13.

JOURNAL OF A RETURN TO TRAM 83.

The Tram retained its botched-night splendor. It stayed the same, yesterday, today, and the day after. Beers were served fifteen minutes late. The waitresses and the busgirls, supported by the mother superior, mocked the world about them. The baby-chicks, all welcoming smiles, accosted the clients with no distinction. The mixed facilities remained overcrowded. The men entered and exited as happy as ever.

They shared the same aspirations: money and sex. They loved money and baby-chicks. They were all drawn to the mines and the Tram. Days, they roamed the mines, whenever they could excavate with the dissident General's authorization, and nights, they celebrated their good fortune at the Tram. They hit on the baby-chicks and the ageless-women, identified with the jazz, and drank beer till they threw up. Some claimed they required the Zambezi River to get properly drunk. Question: in that case, how many more nights of boozing?

"You're ruining the clientele. If you carry on latching hold of the tourists like that, I'll kick you out of the Tram."

In the Tram's early days, entry was barred to the baby-chick-girls. And then it was realized they could serve as bait, that they had a right to life and liberty, that they could rack up unhoped-for revenue, that they featured among the

selection criteria, that it was their only means of survival, and so a kind of free rein was granted to any woman or girl who could entice an individual and make them spend. They were underestimated by the single-mamas and belittled by the armada of waitresses and other servers. The problem was that they were kind, open to negotiation, sincere, and intelligent for young girls of their age. They refused to wear underwear on the pretext that it restricted the curves of their bodies.

“Foreplay spoils the pleasure.”

The pantyless-girlies were possessed of a stage presence given to fueling rumors that they stuffed themselves with “love drugs” and fetishes of all kinds to enslave their tourist clients and make them their puppies, strategies inherited from their grandmothers and forebears who solicited at Tram 83 in the past, back when the joint was called Savorgnan de Brazza then San Salvador then Pool Malebo then Santa Rosa then Zanzibar … Certain tourists, we learned, became quite fired-up as they grew infatuated with the girls, spending some three hours of their nights and days enumerating, singing, screaming, yelling, reciting, and chanting the surnames of these unassuming pantyless-girlies, sometimes even complete genealogies. And thus you could hear, not far from the station whose metal structure … and in the vicinity of the burnt-ass mines, baying as long as a hangman’s rope: Marie Mujinga Mbombo, daughter of Marcel Kalambay Mutombo and Jacqueline Ntuma, paternal granddaughter of Jean-Pierre Tshimbalanga and Thérèse Kalenga, maternal granddaughter of Mr. Jean-Philippe de Sauvageon and Marie-Louise Kahenga, or perhaps Nelly Lomgombo, niece of Mr. Rolando Petuveria, offspring of a certain Mbuanga who worked as an odd-job man at the port of Beach Ngobila. The same legend specified that other tourists made over their wills to them, between two rounds of frisky frolics dispensed by our little-pantyless-single-mama-pre-

baby-chick-sisters, giving up their stones or their apartments or their big cars and worse. Yet others, disoriented by that mysterious pleasure of intertwined bodies, forgot their Flemish, their French, their Portuguese, their Mandarin, their Czech, their Italian, and their Russian in favor of Lingala and Wolof; and so, according to the moralizing rumors, these damned upstarts, these social climbers, disturbed us in the chronology of our pleasure, interfered with our affairs, and lingered in bed with our sisters for a long while, when at the very same moment their brothers continued to speak their Flemish and their Russian, distorted our ancestors in favor of the Merovingians, knocked up hand over fist, escorted gold bars, Northern Station, platform 17, initialed worthless petroleum contracts, cloned a few nascent rebellions against a backdrop of mangled gospels, third-rate glossaries, phraseologies of an inveterate drunkard, a miner by trade or endlessly striking student or carjacker or pizza delivery guy of dubious and other origins. But the fact remains that the appearance of said rumors coincided with the sleeping sickness: imagine the Tram fast asleep, waitresses dozing between two shifts, diggers dozing, students of the endless strike dozing, tourists dozing, jazz musicians dozing, baby-chicks dozing, desperados dozing, and even outside, dozing Syrians, dozing Poles, dozing Frenchies, doz —

“Do you have the time?”

These girls knew how to leapfrog certain stages of their lives, or rather they consumed their adolescence to the full. Their bodies, the kind of heavy artillery that gets you drooling. Requiem liked to go on about how they were the future of humanity.

“Do you have the time?”

RULE NUMBER 46: fuck by day, fuck by night, fuck and fuck some more for you know not what tomorrow brings. Lucien groped his way forward. Awful dark. But the few

votive candles stuck here and there and the pounding band kept the temperature hot. Mr. Malingeau was sat close to the podium facing the musicians who were covering an Afro-American song of the 1950s. Lucien quietly joined him at the table. The publisher was so mad for sax that he didn't see him at all. His great passions were soul music, publishing, carnival, and merchandise. Lucien waited over an hour before addressing him.

"Good evening, Mr. Malingeau!"

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know. I was absorbed by the beat, too."

He stammered. Truth be told, he was somewhere else. With the publisher lost in his own contemplations, he'd been wondering if it was credible to enlist the character of Lumumba alongside Napoleon and Christopher Columbus. He felt guilty at fiddling with history. Is there a limit to the imagination of a writer who takes real facts and uses them to construct a world where truth and fiction coexist? What right does one have to play around with collective memory? Is there any credibility in getting these sometimes-disparate characters in tune? The starting point for all these characters was the thirst in them. But the ending didn't seem easy to stomach. Not by him but by the audience, who would already balk at his Che who only had five lines ("yes," "no," "revolution," "duty," "struggle"), or the garrulous silence of a Mussolini Benito before the almost passionate eloquence of President Nicolae Ceauşescu.

"I'm sorry, but music, you know, it's another part of me."

"Me too."

A choir, a salsa variant with an aftertaste of funk for aural pleasures.

"What would you like?"

"Do you have the time?"

"Vodka."

He hailed a waitress, who strutted over all insolent.

“I really must apologize for the sad events of the other day. I thought it would be quite easy to breathe a certain view of the world into this city through literature. What a waste for intelligent folk like us!”

A soprano took the stage to a round of applause. The Railroad Diva, she was known as. Her fair complexion suggested distant horizons, Thailand perhaps, Nepal perhaps, Afghanistan perhaps, Oceania perhaps, who knows. She too had come to seek her fortune no doubt (but from that to singing?). She performed all her compositions to a track of recorded noises of steam engines leaving the Northern Station. Her sublime voice sliced through the atmosphere, dissipated then reappeared amid the horns, whistles, grating, screeching, shouts of passengers …

“We mustn’t give up,” the publisher continued.

She’d had a smash hit with “My Trains and Me,” a song that stayed in the charts for nearly six years.

“What do you want?”

She didn’t go to sleep hungry, what with all the records she pumped onto the market. That’s a chick to marry, advised the Negus. RULE NUMBER 33: if you don’t manage to get yourself out of this hole, marry a girl to get you out, but not just any girl! She’s gotta sweat gold and cash; and that kind of girl is a critically endangered species.

“Publish your stage-tale.”

Émilienne was waiting for Lucien. She saw someone confused by life. Lucien didn’t dare even hold her gaze. He was dirty, distressed, stubbly, worn out by his own destiny.

“Your stage-tale, I told you it interested me.”

“Not that piece. It’s still under construction.”

He placed his texts on the table. He thought, Porte de Clignancourt: “We’re working here while you have fun out there!”

He picked up his pen, wrote some long sentences before continuing …

Émilienne ordered two rums.

“So you mean to tell me you don’t have any writing to publish?”

“Tip …”

“Foreplay wows me.”

“I love myself and I love you.”

“I’ve got a beautiful body.”

“Come my sweet baby.”

Lucien rummaged through his texts and pulled out some pages bound together.

“Here, a version that’s a few months old.”

Ferdinand lit a cigarette.

“What was the title again?”

Lucien didn’t reply.

“Friday, same time, I’ll tell you what I think. Maybe I’ll bring the publishing contract with me.”

Lucien stood up.

“You don’t even thank me?”

Lucien walked toward the exit.

“Listen, Lucien …”

Émilienne left too, hot on his heels.

This was a girl apart, unbalanced. She was looking for true love. Lucien behaved courteously toward her. He was the man of her dreams, of that she was sure. And all the baby-chicks reproached her for it, since money was all that mattered to them.

Requiem liked to say that every human has two cables in their head: a blue and a yellow. If the blue cable is cut, the person goes mad. The Negus continued in this philosophical vein: “Three-quarters of humanity have already lost the blue cable.” His gaze swept the Tram, as he spelled out the names of tourists, waitresses, busgirls, diggers, mercenaries, and baby-chicks who no longer had the cable in question. The name of the Tram’s owner, of Lucien, of Émilienne, and of the busgirl with fat lips never failed to appear on his list.

Swinging rhythms, keyboards, clarinets, saxophones, drums, and electric guitars, a band come straight from Guadeloupe.

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14.

REQUIEM AND MALINGEAU, OR WHEN TWO CROOKS DRINK TO EACH OTHER'S HEALTH.

Tram 83, interior.

In the background, a saxophonist performing a solo.

Center-forward, the young ladies of Avignon in their vestal robes eyeing up all the masculine clients.

Left-back, the Chinese tourists.

Far-left, the Indo-European tourists.

Front door, the busgirl with fat lips and her colonial-infantry patter.

Leaning on the bar, Requiem and Ferdinand Malingeau.

"It's been suggested that you're chasing after me."

"Maybe."

"What do you want with me?"

"Stop raiding my henhouse."

"You should go see a marabout."

"I've heard you'd like to publish Lucien's writings."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"I forbid it."

"By what right?"

"I have no explanation to give you. It's thanks to me that Lucien's here in town. I used all of my influence to get the bastard out of that Back-Country cesspit. He's under my guardianship and I won't tell you twice."

"My dear friend, you are quite mad."

“But if you really want to publish his drivel, we could come to some arrangement. Do you know that Lucien has done me much wrong and that I am not ready to absolve him? As long as I live, I will strive to ridicule him, to belittle him, to destroy him.”

It was hardly a secret. Requiem held Lucien responsible for everything: the rout of the government forces, his father’s death, his mother’s swift remarriage, his divorce from Jacqueline.

“He took advantage of my absence to steal my wife. No, I shall battle Lucien until the end of the world. I pity you, Malingeau. If you really want to publish his writings, you must pay a five thousand dollar fee for authorization to publish. Otherwise …”

The publisher burst out laughing.”

“Listen, Malingeau …”

“Go get some sleep, Negus!”

The publisher drained his bottle and headed toward the young ladies of Avignon, leaving the Negus stranded.

The publisher was a regular of Tram 83. He came here nearly every day of the week and was treated like a prince. His reputation had grown the day the dissident General mentioned him in one of his interminable speeches. They’d attended the same high school in Geneva and knew each other personally. In 1978 they lost touch with each other, the General having changed schools. It was through the press that Malingeau picked up the trail of his former classmate. At the time, the dissident General’s name was on everyone’s lips and provided extensive copy for foreign newspapers.

Ferdinand Malingeau was one of those rare specimens, as his name suggests. Originally a nonprofit tourist, he was swept up by the ambience of Tram 83 and its bargirls. He held a master’s in theology, economics, and general agronomy, and had been a middle manager at a large bank in his native country. At least that’s what the gossip said. In

a town erected solely upon guile, resourcefulness, Kalashnikovs, and the stone, it had become hard to discern the precise identity of the tourists. Which countries did they really hail from? Why had they come to Africa? What was their true motivation? Did they have wives and children? The fact remains that Malingeau, according to the grapevine, had given up everything to come feed off the soil of the City-State. He had initially hesitated between India and Tibet. Nearly all the nonprofit tourists were tired of the monotony and arrived with the hope of living in a world, a continent, as yet unpolluted by the excrement of globalization. He survived for three months without excavating. Which was a true miracle. As he himself said, he didn't want to profit from Black Africa. His blunder was to start frequenting Tram 83. Life in Tram 83 is execrable if you've got no dough. The baby-chicks spurn you. The diggers spurn you. The waitresses and the busgirls spurn you. The Chinese tourists spurn you. The for-profit tourists spurn you. The musicians spurn you. The students spurn you. The mercenaries spurn you. The slim-jims spurn you. All the traders spurn you. In short, a pestilential solitude. Humiliation took on a different form, particularly in the case of a white tourist. It was for this reason, so the rumors insinuated, that he had decided to excavate, to obtain the wherewithal to satisfy the baby-chicks who pursued him, and thus penetrate the kingdom of the first-class tourists.

Those who'd run into him when he arrived in the City-State swell with pride when they speak of the man. Everyone recalls Malingeau's irruption into their world. It was a Saturday night and the Tram was heaving as usual. The door opened and a dirty, scrawny, taciturn young man, with a face like that of a forlorn dog, entered the Tram, carrying nothing but a little suitcase. The Tram's clients knew each other even if they didn't always converse. It was immediately apparent that this was a newcomer.

He’d wandered about some before winding up at Tram 83, which, like all places of socializing, operated according to a hierarchy. Individuals banded together according to geographical origin, the language they spoke, but above all their pecuniary state: the for-profit tourists, the colored tourists, most of whom were poor, the white tourists, and, finally, the Chinese tourists, who refused to mix with the others and always moved around in a tight bunch, even in the mixed facilities. These castes displayed their own internal subdivisions, often hinging upon money and fairness of skin. Thus the terms “second-class tourists” or “second-rate tourists” embraced both the whites and the blacks who were stuck for cash. The publisher could not therefore directly court the for-profit tourists possessing excavation rights. It was through hanging out with the African tourists that he met the Negus. Thanks to Requiem’s contacts, the publisher was received by his former colleague, the dissident General, who granted him the authorization to excavate, as well as the key to a mine that had been abandoned in the aftermath of decolonization. Malingeau appointed the Negus director of the factory he’d just established. Requiem ripped him off over a period of two years. He either fiddled the factory’s successful tenders or else brokered potential ones to the for-profit tourists. Which annoyed Malingeau, who fired him after several warnings. The Negus never got over this, complaining to whomever it might concern: “It’s thanks to me he can even open his mouth. He was a zombie when he turned up at the Tram, a revenant, living dead. But being as ungrateful as he is, when it came to payment he told me to go whistle for it. If I’m scamming this guy it’s because the minerals belong to us, they’re our minerals.”

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15.

THE DISADVANTAGE OF COURTING A BABY-CHICK WITHOUT KNOWING HOW HARMFUL SHE IS.

Ferdinand was quietly sipping his beer when a young woman sat down at his table without being invited. According to the Tram 83 gossip, all the women of the City-State made brutal use of gris-gris to nab their prey. Which is plausible. It was hard, virtually impossible not to give in to their spell.

“You’re selfish!”

“You think so?”

“I know so.”

“Why?’

“You’re drinking all alone, even though the Tram is full, with no shortage of beautiful company.”

“I have no need of that,” brooded the publisher.

“So my presence bothers you?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

She raised her left hand. The busgirl with the fat lips came running.

“A glass of red wine!”

The diggers, the baby-chicks, and the students, as well as the poor tourists, always ordered wine whenever they chatted with the for-profit tourists. It’s classy, they would always say. The young woman whispered a few words. The

publisher had a fit of giggles. And the conversation continued even livelier than before.

“You’re handsome.”

“Me?”

“You’re handsome like in a porn film.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, very handsome, like in a film where they practice sexual relations,” replied the young woman, evasively.

The publisher gave a long sigh.

“Am I lying? I just observe what I see.”

Smoke wreaths from cigarettes.

Hoarse voices from alcohol.

Stifled laughs from baby-chicks.

A blues riff, the diluted notes of a quartet in the chiaroscuro sky of the Tram. At each chorus, the soprano whined:

Coddle me without killing me
Stroke me without smothering me
Lick my body without wounding me
Oh, dearly beloved
Take me to Odessa
And strike up the symphony of love for me

“What do you live off?”

“I’m retired,” answered the publisher, all smiles.

“No, please, tell me how you spend your days.”

“I’m in mining.”

“What a fine profession!”

“And Madame?”

“Mademoiselle, if you please. Why seek to age me? What have you got to lose by calling me Mademoiselle?”

“And Mademoiselle?”

She stood up, stepped a quarter-way round the table and extended her hand to Malingeau. He stood up. They moved

slowly to the dance floor.

The notes flew about like leaves in the wind.

The saxophone squealed beneath the soprano's whining.

Coddle me without killing me
Stroke me without smothering me
Lick my body without wounding me
Oh, dearly beloved
Take me to Odessa
And strike up the symphony of love for me

"You're handsome."

"You already told me."

"Yes, I know."

"I'm a little old for your age."

"Age is a pretext."

She rolled and slid her hand across the publisher's silky-smooth pants. In one movement, she delved, grabbed Malingeau's penis, and began to play with it. He held out for a few minutes, capitulated …

The soprano and her chorus.

Coddle me without killing me
Stroke me without smothering me
Lick my body without wounding me
Oh, dearly beloved
Take me to Odessa

"Shall we go?"

"Which neighborhood do you live in?"

"Saint Athanasius."

"I knew it. The white neighborhood."

It's one of the oldest neighborhoods in the City-State. Originally, only whites were allowed to live there. Now, it's the neighborhood where the dissident General and the for-

profit tourists dwell. It lies between Vampiretown — built for the drivers, valets, and other Africans serving the colonial government — and the Red Zone, a large-scale shantytown or urban garbage dump, which violated every ideal of city planning, sleazy and filthy in the dark and dubious bargain of history. When a digger is lucky enough to find a diamond, his primary reflex is to change his place of residence. All the skeletons living in the Red Zone dream of dwelling in Saint Athanasius one day.

“Foreplay is like democracy, as far as I’m concerned. If you don’t caress me, I’ll call the Americans.”

Out front of the Tram, two baby-chicks fought over a seventy-year-old tourist. Malingeau and his prey made their way through the horde of gawkers, under the appalled gaze of several pimps jealous of the young woman’s overblown independence. They walked arm in arm to the car, pausing for some tongue-to-tongue and fiddling of flesh. Sated by this foreplay, the publisher started his limousine, left hand down the tigress’s burst blouse.

“You are like the sun, you are the only man for me.”

“I never hoped for such a beautiful meeting.”

“I am the queen of the night. Without me, the Tram is a thrift shop of broken dreams.”

“Your name?”

“Christelle, Chris to my friends.”

They reached their destination in a quarter of an hour.

Malingeau’s house, a royal palace.

She placed her delicate lips on Malingeau’s. With her fingers, she set to unbuttoning his shirt.

“We’ll be more comfortable in the bedroom. Come.”

“Make love to me here. The bedroom is too official for my taste.”

They tumbled onto the sofa.

“Give me the money first!”

Malingeau felt about for his pants lying on the floor, and pulled out some notes without checking.

“Here, my princess.”

“More.”

“You like money!”

“I like life.”

She practically snatched the cash from him,

“Here baby, let me bring you aboard.”

and raised her leg slightly.

Two quick rounds, then Christelle demanded a third, a fourth, a fifth round. Three hours of gymnastics, after which the publisher collapsed. She got dressed, Zairian style, took a little camera from her clutch, and snapped the dozing body: a dozen photos.

When Malingeau drew himself from his long sleep, the music was still droning in his head. Christelle was already gone. She had taken care to scribble a line on a scrap of paper.

“I drank your body until my thirst was worn.”

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16.

MALINGEAU, LUCIEN, AND REQUIEM, OR THE LOVE IMPOSSIBLE.

There are cities which don’t need literature: they are literature. They file past, chest thrust out, head on their shoulders. They are proud and full of confidence despite the garbage bags they cart around. The City-State, an example among so many others — she pulsated with literature.

“I love you, baby.”

“I don’t like foreplay. It kills the pleasure.”

“Do you have the time?”

The City-State was written by her gigolos, her baby-chicks, her diggers, her four-star whorehouses, her dissident rebels ready to imprison you, her prospectors, her semi-tourists. Lucien rushed into the night, his imitation-leather bag slung across his body. Tourist Street, Independence Street, International Armistice Street, Gravedigger Street, Mineral Street, Copper Street, First Revolution Street, Third Revolution Street, True and Sincere Revolution Street … Out front of the establishment, a pitched brawl between the diggers, the striking students, and the mercenaries over the sexual abuse of a student single-mama Tram habitué by a bunch of diggers. He got out his notebook, jotted down the extent to which railroads,

minerals, and ill-contained desires lead to the putrefaction of bodies created in the image of the riches …

Same decor inside the Tram, give or take a few breasts. Nearly all the players on stage. A brass-band-drum-kit. The publisher, ever punctual to his meetings, was conversing with a single-mama-chick. Lucien sat down, ordered a drink. The publisher got rid of the young woman.

“I’ve not devoted much energy to your manuscript. I’ve read the first half, which I find impressive inasmuch as your twenty characters wander endlessly about this building for reasons that are not always mentionable. I appreciate the language they use to confront each other, the crudeness of the words, the humor.”

“Tip …”

“You are a brilliant wordsmith. A writer, that’s obvious. Your characters fill the space extremely well. I can see them on a stage, perhaps even here at the Tram, over there on the podium.

He pointed at the area occupied by the Russian brass band.

“If I understand correctly, you’re going to publish me?”

“What are you trying to do? Get me horny?”

“Getting drunk on wine feels like a con. Two little glasses and you lose your head. Beer, now that’s a heavenly way to get wasted.”

“Take me to Bratislava and make me your dream queen!”

Their neighbors’ tittle-tattle interfered with their conversation.

“Not so fast, Lucien! I want you to rework the text from scratch. Twenty characters, that’s too much for your stage-tale.”

Lucien looked at him, expressionless.

“I need a text with ten characters, tops. Reduce the twenty to ten and I’ll publish this little gem.”

“Do you have the time?”

“Do you think it’s possible what you’re asking of me?”

“Hands off my tits! What are you trying to do? Blackmail me?”

“Sleeping with two baby-chicks is suicide. They guzzle your calories in the course of a night.”

“You are the master of your text, you simply have to transfer the load from the ten characters you cut to the others.”

Outside, a gunshot.

“Do you have the time?”

“I am keeping my twenty characters, sir.”

Outside, the students screaming vendetta.

“Do you have the time?”

“In that case, find yourself another publisher!”

“Man is born a one-armed bandit.”

“Do you have the time?

Outside, diggers, imprecations, anthems of the Second Republic, chronicle of a leadership conflict. He seized his text from Malingeau’s hands almost by force.

“I will reduce the characters, watch out you don’t …”

“Listen, Lucien, in the meantime, do me a short story, fifteen hundred words on the ambitions of the dissident General.”

“Would sir like some company?”

“Why the dissident General and not the train tracks or even the mines?”

“Tip …”

“Take me far away from the Tram, to Sarajevo.”

“We drink the water of the poor, we do: beer! Leave the fizzy wine and the whiskey to the for-profit tourists.”

“See, my booty’s not fake, how could it be? I’m Brazilian.”

“Tip!”

“Do you have the time?”

They stayed talking. Lucien left at 10 P.M., disappointed by the new deadline.

Late that night, Requiem turned up with a baby-chick. They took their place opposite Malingeau.

“Hi Requiem.”

The Negus remained impassive.

“You look in good shape,” remarked the publisher.

He ignored him for at least twenty minutes, preferring to play with the breasts of the young lady. Malingeau stood up to leave. Requiem spoke sharply to him:

“I’ve changed my mind. You don’t owe five thousand dollars but ten thousand to acquire the authorization to publish Lucien’s writings.”

“*C*’mon, you’re tapped in the head! In five months’ time I will publish Lucien’s stage-tale and I will hold a grand book launch.”

“If you persist, I’ll persist too!”

“You’re wasting my time.”

The publisher was leaving when the Negus shouted after him:

“If you publish regardless, I’ll publish your pictures!”

Malingeau retraced his steps.

“What pictures?”

“You know Christelle?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The girl who screwed you last Sunday.”

“Leave my private life out of all this!”

“She works for me.”

“…”

“She fucked and photographed you. You dare to publish Lucien’s writings, I’ll publish the pictures, all those photos on which you appear without a stitch, stark naked,” Requiem added, bursting into laughter.

Malingeau thought with his penis. A more aware man would not have chanced dallying with another baby-chick after what had happened to him. Two days before Christelle and the Negus played this trick on him, he’d had a quite terrifying encounter. The crowded Tram left much to be

desired. Each time the atmosphere cranked up a notch, the word was that the residents of the nearby cemeteries had arrived, to get soaked, smoke a joint, rub their bodies against ours, snack on a dog cutlet, and dance a few steps. He met a baby-chick in the mixed facilities. He invited her to drink some red wine.

“Perhaps she belongs to a wealthy family,” he told himself.

“Come along, let’s go to my place, I’ll give you a good massage,” the girl said. They took his beige limousine.

They arrived at the girl’s place, a two-storey house, with sentries, bodyguards, lampposts, and German shepherds. They made love until five in the morning. They fell asleep entwined. When he awoke, the girl was gone and he found himself bare naked on a crummy bed in a derelict hovel close to the Cabu Bridge. He dressed quickly, jumped into his limousine, third gear. He arrived at the Tram. Some people outside, girls, girls, girls. He entered the Tram, blurted out his tale.

“The girl’s name?” they asked him.

“Georgette Luise de Sonfina, she wore a long periwinkle blue dress and gave off a scent of jasmine.”

The answer they gave froze him to the spot. The baby-chick in question was the daughter of a tourist who’d lived in the 19th century. She had died some eighty years ago, of a cerebral hemorrhage. She had even been buried in the clothes the publisher described, and the same jasmine perfume.

Malingeau attempted to argue but the Negus stuck to his guns.

“You publish that guy, I’ll publish your nudity.”

Not knowing how to proceed, he sat his fat ass down, and lit a cigarette. Requiem continued playing accordion with the young lady’s massive-melon-breasts as if nothing had happened.

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17.

THE COLLECTOR OF NUDES.

Requiem possessed nude photographs of some two hundred and fifty tourists. They were completely at his feet. They bought him drinks, paid money into his account each month, revered him almost. Irked by this perpetual blackmail, one tourist pressed charges for threatening behavior and defamation. Overnight, Requiem published the pictures of the tourist in his birthday suit in the gossip rags of the City-State. Cherry on the cake, he persuaded the girl to accuse the tourist of rape. The poor tourist pleaded mutual consent, a complete waste of time. Age is a malleable thing in a country whose citizens have been without ID cards since at least the time of Noah, the prophet Ezekiel, and sister Abigail. The young woman was already an adult at the time of the incident. But there was money at stake. Who doesn't like money? The court, which was corrupt to the core, had found a cash cow. The tourist was ruined, threatened with prison, and made to pay a fine. His popularity ever waning, the dissident General sent the tourist back to his own country, hoping to win the favor of his people. The for-profit tourists protested for several weeks. They were powerless and incapable of rendering the Negus harmless. They could not eliminate him physically. That might have provoked uncontrollable riots and looting, and they would be requested to pack up and

leave or else flee like in the days following independence. The worst profanation a for-profit tourist could allow himself was to touch a single hair on Requiem's head.

The Negus's grand dream was to obtain pictures of the dissident General.

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18.

MEETING AND TRADING OF ARMS TO SHOW THE MERCENARIES, DESPERADOS, AND THEIR DISSIDENT GENERAL THAT THE WORLD IS A WALTZ.

Lucien arrived at 63 Prime Ministry Street around two in the morning.

“Do you have the time? Because I’m smitten. I offer you my breasts. Change me. Make me the most beautiful woman!”

“Drinking beer isn’t drinking. It’s like drinking water.”

“Make love to me hard.”

“Doggy-style, spoon, or missionary? I can even do cowgirl, crab, or octopus, that’s proof I’m acquainted with the facts of life.”

Requiem was waiting for him, accompanied by eight men, all with evocative names: Dragon, Mortal Combat, Free Kick, Dysentery, Invincible Measles, and so on. RULE NUMBER 27: you don’t head out to settle your business as if you were going to the beach. “Be imposing,” he stated impatiently. Lucien guessed they were diggers, going by the picks and shovels. After greeting each other, they walked, without a word, down the street to the warehouses that had been burned out and left derelict following the looting of 1992, then restored, then set on fire during the second half of a war of liberation, then taken over by the

dissident rebels, who stayed there with their families and the hundreds of domestic animals they kept.

The main entrance gave some idea of the nature of the place. Goats. Roosters. Turkeys. Doughnut stalls. Wheelbarrows. Vehicles from another era. Chairs without legs. Single-mama-pre-baby-chicks who laugh right in your face and heap abuse at you even if you don't react: "You're all impotent good-for-nothings, scaredy-cats, peasants, pussies, barely men at all. Come here and let's see if you can make us moan!" Single-mamas cooked here and there. They crossed the yard filled with children running in all directions.

Lucien wanted to know a bit more about the mission but,

"Gotta see *Pig Across Paris*. He dominates the film like you've no idea."

Requiem suddenly began a conversation about Jean Gabin. He had his own peculiar way of dodging awkward questions through cinema and his weakness for gypsy music. Three in the morning … They entered the third warehouse on the left, a kind of utter mess revised and tropicalized.

Great minds think alike. A well-built man, in camouflage fatigues, standing and cleaning a submachine gun, welcomed them with open arms. Requiem hurried through the introductions. 3:10 A.M. They took their places directly on the jerrycans. The man called out to a young lady, who brought bottles and a succession of joints. Requiem summed up the situation: "Impossible to enter the Polygon lately without being armed. This past month we got shot at by Death-Death's gang. They opened fire on three of my men while we were taking the merchandise for washing, and vamoosed with it. Last week the desperados and the mine police laid into us."

"What do you need?"

He continued swabbing the gun without even looking at his visitors. The Negus took out a scrap of paper and

slipped it into his hand.

“Anything that will allow us to fight our way through the rock.”

The soldier got up, returned with Kalashnikovs, bayonets, explosives, and uniforms.

“It’s the same gear as last time, please return it to me within two days.”

They settled up. Requiem took a few notes out of his haversack. 3:50 A.M.

“The deities quarrel over the heavens and us the earth. They can’t prevent us feasting on our own diamonds,” he moaned.

His gun handling was flawless. Which is normal for someone who’d served in Sudan, Angola, Korea, the former Zaire, Israel, and even Rwanda. Like most young students of the time, he had enlisted supposedly to counter the advances of the second wave of the third war of liberation. Many flocked to join the army with the aim of changing the world, particularly since they enjoyed fantastic pay, as well as training abroad.

Once outside, they divvied up the artillery. Lucien dithered. They made him pull on a uniform.

“We must recover our sacks.”

The dissident General ruled supreme over the City-State. He owned outright twenty artisanal-diamond purchase and export houses and was a shareholder in nearly all the firms run by the tourists. He sold off the mining concessions, or sometimes even gave them as gifts to whomever he liked. In his megalomania, he closed and opened Hope Mine as he saw fit, even though the whole of the City-State scrounged a living off this mine. At each closure, an indescribable crisis struck the country for the enjoyment of a minority of tourists authorized to excavate at any time. But adventurers and traders pissed all over the lunatic dissident General’s decree-laws concerning the closure of Hope Mine. At night they infiltrated the facilities,

which were guarded by mercenaries, the chief's personal militia, and other security outfits. Clashes ensued, lasting for hours, accompanied by corpses. The desperados colluded with the mercenaries, supplying them with information and straight-out attacking the diggers, from whom they confiscated the merchandise. The heavily armed diggers, dubbed suicidals for their determination, didn't let themselves be intimidated in any way. They handled their Kalashnikovs wonderfully. Whether diggers or dissident rebels or for-profit tourists or students, the common denominator was the gold rush that began at the station whose metal structure …

Lucien, Requiem, and his friends climbed into a jalopy, destination: Hope Mine. Requiem, who was snorting cocaine after cocaine, soliloquized: "Objective 1: we recover our sacks. Objective 2: beat the crap out of any imbecile blocking our way. Objective 3: vanish into thin air. Objective 4: night of debauchery at Tram 83." Stoned out of their heads on cannabis, Requiem's crew attempted to outdo each other through the bragging they unfurled, from the single-mamas with sausage-thighs they'd scarfed during burglaries, to the miner-guards slaughtered in cold blood, not forgetting the many cathouses, which they evoked with a nostalgic air.

In his notebook, Lucien wrote: "The mouths are infected with a thousand thoughts of cannibalism modeled on the Second Republic. What will they munch on when the frangipanis yield guava and the eucalyptuses earthworms?"

Hope Mine, situated not far from the town center, passed for a veritable Tower of Babel. It was the main bone of contention between the various protagonists, who fought over it until the last drop of sweat. The numerous security firms didn't live together in perfect harmony. They functioned according to mood, the tourists, and the interests on that day's agenda. They were hard to manipulate. They betrayed each other, battled each other,

hit it off with each other, doggedly harried the suicidals, plotted on behalf of the dissident General, and gathered the scraps from the tourists of British descent.

When they were a few minutes from the Polygon, Dragon and Mortal Combat went scouting ahead. They weren't long in returning.

"The way is clear."

Requiem cocked his gun:

"Shoot at anything that moves!"

Hope Mine was the oldest of all the mines in the City-State, and it drew the most prospectors. A high wall studded with barbed wire ran around it, enclosing an area twenty-one miles by twenty-five. It contained warehouses, prefabricated sheds, old locomotives, boxcars, and jalopies from the Second Republic. It was renowned for its subterranean galleries packed with all kinds of minerals. To the northwest of this site with its Martian soil lay the famous Polygon: mounds of stones and craters potentially rich in iron, cobalt, zinc, and cassiterite. The gossip drifting around Tram 83, the Singapore bar-restaurant, and even the Face-to-Face brothel run by Aunty, known as Body-to-Body Granny to her friends, highlighted the fact that even in the farthest lands, beyond Muanda and even Beach Ngobila, Brazzaville, and Gibraltar, there were to be found men who studied Hope Mine and knew it by heart. One must be wary of these unsubstantiated rumors reeled off between a pair of breasts, a salsa variant, and a vodka poured by a busgirl peeved at a baby-chick pinching from right under her nose a client upon whom rested her every hope.

Once inside, Requiem scattered his men to go reconnoiter. The darkness and a constant fear of receiving a walloping made the procedure difficult to follow. They combed a few buildings, smashing them open with the butts of their guns. Not much to speak of, just some old

clothes left by fugitives, and garbage bags half full of cow dung. They continued their search.

“Low content,” remarked Requiem, who was already losing his temper.

Lucien, holding a gun for the first time, was at his wits’ end, as he begged Mortal Combat and Invincible Measles to convince Requiem to hightail it. But the Negus persisted in checking out the premises.

“Perhaps they’ve already removed my merchandise. If we trace an imaginary line, maybe we’ll run into another group all loaded up, and then we’ll teach them to comply without being asked twice.”

He lit a cigarette rolled from cassava leaves.

They went down into the second crater in the center of the Polygon, dug away, Zairian style, extracted two sacks of gravel to wash close by, exited left from the hole, and ran straight into a horde of desperados heavily armed with machetes. Greetings peppered with irony, furtive glances, they faced each other down, before deciding it wasn’t worth laying into each other for sacks with no obvious content.

In the end, after being chivvied by Lucien and his friends into turning back, Requiem declared that it was amateurish to go carting their weapons around, and suggested burying them and returning there that very evening, all fired up to loot the whole place.

“Let’s head back to the Tram.”

They ended their night of transgression at Tram 83 to the dismally tragic lamentations of the prima donna, the Castafiore, the Railroad Diva.

Tram 83 had a soft spot for the Negus. He stayed the same on all his fronts. He knew what he was doing, that you can’t invent the wheel twice, that there’s no point fretting, that the rules of the game are clearly defined, and that the main thing is to live off anything that falls into your hands. “The tragedy is already written, we merely preface

it.” From the moment this motto began to resonate consciously in his mind, he never held back from following his heart. He was simple and honest even in his mischief.

Requiem was the opposite of Lucien, who irritated the whole of the Tram with his waffling, a hypocrite scribbling on scraps of paper instead of telling us the truth to our faces, and lazy regarding the girls. He tired us out, Lucien did. He was too much! What’s the point of playing the intellectual all the time if the equation must remain the same? The roads that lead to truth and honesty are cut by flooding, filth, dog turds, lies, and blackouts, but why did he obstinately maintain his belief that a better world was possible? Why did he strive to reduce humanity to the dreams and quotations he gleaned on the pages of his texts? It’s called cowardice, perhaps even amnesia, or indeed a combination of the two. The world is beyond redemption, as Requiem put it. But supposing … Putting aside our personal feelings, perhaps Lucien was right. Let’s think about it. What would we do if we found ourselves in the shoes of this *poète maudit*? Requiem’s answer: “The tragedy is already written, we merely preface it. So let us preface.”

The Tram operated twenty-four-seven. They hung out there touching up titties, smoking, and drinking until around two in the afternoon. Lucien, who couldn’t stand it anymore, left the bunch earlier. He had concocted an explosive cocktail: wine + vodka + lemonade + whiskey brought in from Beach Ngobila.

“Do you have the time?”

Incapable of walking, Requiem let Lucien return to the flat on his own. He vomited, reeled … A desperado saw him back home in exchange for a few coins.

Ideas to nourish his texts abounded. How, for example, to halve the characters of his theater piece without trashing the plot? Why not structure the text into two major movements, The Burnt Mornings and The Weeping Willows,

to avoid losing historical credibility? Deep within himself, he hefted the monologue Lenin would deliver when told that Napoleon had left for Saint Helena accompanied by Mao Zedong. He tried to write in his notebook by any means. Waste of effort. His head spun. His limbs gave way. He remembered his wedding day. He rolled about on his miserable bed like someone suffering from syphilis. 4:10 P.M. He eventually fell asleep somehow.

Immediately a series of nightmares. Nightmare 1: a locomotive crammed full of minerals makes an infernal drone as it leaves platform 18 for horizons unknown. Nightmare 2: his grandfather asks him to jump into the first boxcar, otherwise “you’ll die like a homeless dog for wanting to hang on to a town that is no longer suited to you.” Nightmare 3: dissident rebels confront striking students allied with diggers beneath a hail of stones not far from the Tram. Nightmare 4: child-soldiers ransack the shops of the City-State. Nightmare 5: soldiers pursue single-mamas, crackling, trucks, screams, firing into the air. Nightmare 6: suicidals break into the bank belonging to the tourist owner of the sheds opposite Hope Mine. Nightmare 7: a rape, some temple forecourt. Nightmare 8: a rape, Fanatics Avenue. Nightmare 9: a rape, platform 7. Nightmare 10: a gang rape, blowjobs, and pitched brawls, Boulevard …

He woke up around ten in the evening. Hurried. A cold shower.

Past eleven, just time to read his texts, then a phone call from Paris, Métro Clignancourt.

“Where are you at with your piece on Lumumba? I’m killing myself to get the necessary contacts.”

Lucien tried to reassure him.

“Be patient, a few commas and I’ll send you the text.”

His friend also wanted him to write an article about Abderrahmane Sissako’s latest film. Lucien paused, before deciding.

“No, I don’t have enough time.”

He remembered having watched it just before he left for the City-State.

“Please!”

Lucien rejected the request. But his friend stuck to his guns.

“You know, the film was hailed by the international critics at Cannes.”

“But.”

Lucien reluctantly agreed.

He found it a real job to get the first lines down on paper. He identified with the main character, a certain Abdallah who shows up in a small town to await his departure for Europe and who is obliged to live in isolation since he’s separated from the inhabitants by a language he doesn’t understand.

He got down to the task. Impossible to continue the article. The verbs slipped from his fingers. The prepositions lay in wait then skipped out on him. The subordinate clauses screamed their independence. The adjectives frowned and took to the rails of oblivion.

A phone call.

“Requiem, my merchandise is sacred!”

A feeling of guilt overcame him. He shouldn’t have left the Back-Country, he told himself, what a foolish thing I’ve done! He could have stayed and ceased his misadventures with *littérature engagée*, or had his palm greased — there is no lack of opportunities for potential seasonal writers: for each political regime, you produce your literature.

You write an epic poem about the hairstyle of the president’s wife, they give you a house; a monologue rehashing the dreams of the Minister of Divination, Clairvoyance, and Prophecies, they buy you a trip to Venice; a novel about the president’s childhood, they appoint you Minister of Agriculture and Bovine Farming. Too late! He gathered chance snippets of sentences and

arrived at a parturition he hastened to send off. His computer boycotted the transposition of the document to PDF. He bustled about. Bad luck, blackout! He'd forgotten that it was a Thursday, that the power had to meet the needs of a small local mining firm, that all the residents knew this, and that they had zero right to make the protests that, incidentally, were prohibited across the entire national territory. An idea came to him: maybe light a candle and start another text? Yes. Where to begin? He wrote a series of arabesques that he tried to read aloud. At twelve o'clock, the Negus turned up with three baby-chicks barely twelve years old.

"Take one, if you like, help yourself."

Lucien got up.

"And what's your name?" (One of the three, with promising breasts.)

Lucien picked up his jacket.

"Give me five dollars."

Lucien left in a visceral rage.

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19.

RELIGION OF THE STONE: WE DON’T KNOW THE WEATHER FORECAST, WE ARE THE WEATHER FORECAST, NOT TO MENTION THAT WE DEVISE OUR OWN SOLAR SYSTEM. THE SUN RISES AT THE NORTHERN STATION AND SETS AT THE TRAM BETWEEN TWO GRAPEFRUIT-BREASTS. WE ARE THE CLOUD PRINCES OF GUILE AND RESOURCEFULNESS, THE SONS OF THE EARTH AND OF THE RAILROAD. IT’S THE NEW WORLD HERE. YOU DON’T FUCK, WE FUCK YOU. YOU DON’T EAT, WE EAT YOU. YOU DON’T WRECK, WE WRECK YOU. IT’S THE NEW WORLD HERE. IT’S EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF, AND SHIT FOR ALL. IT’S THE JUNGLE.

No running water these last two weeks for patriotic reasons, apologized the dissident General: “You know it’s difficult to resolve all the problems at once, the mines don’t yield what they used to, and if you’re without water and electricity, it goes to show how much those rascals in the Back-Country have brought the country to its knees, indeed that is the reason why we decided to take up arms, to sort the situation out ourselves, don’t hold it against us, we’ll regain our prestige, but one bit of good news: I am thinking of reopening Mine 15 so the students can work at night to supplement their expenses, they’ve demanded far too many

study grants, too bad for those patriots in a hurry to get straight down to it …”

It was with a heavy step that Lucien rejoined the bunch out front of the Tram. Requiem was keen he join the group at all costs. The more there are of you, the more you can deal with assaults. The more there are of you, the more you can seize the initiative to attack. The more there are of you, the more sacks you can carry away. Unlike other mining sites that were chock-full of diamonds, or cobalt, or copper, or bronze, and nothing else, Hope Mine produced all of the above minerals. The region was so rich in deposits that a legend had grown up — and it happens to be true — recounting how the inhabitants of the City-State dug up their gardens, their houses, their living rooms, their bathrooms, their bedrooms, and even the cemetery. Yes, in the cemetery, funerals would sometimes turn festive following the chance discovery of a high-grade stone. They even dug at the station whose metal structure recalled the 1885s, particularly at night, sometimes even with the collusion of the local mayor, who wielded a pickax in his own offices, and busily scoured public buildings from top to bottom. It was said that in a single day dozens of sacks of heterogenite were carted off from huts and other makeshift camps. With such eroded, tampered foundations, houses threatened to collapse at the slightest rain. Will you consent to starve to death when there’s silver, copper, barium, tin, or coal lying quietly under your feet? From the area around Hope Mine to as far as the east side of Vampiretown, the city took on the appearance of an archaeological site. Even the goats and wheelbarrows smelled of the cobalt quarries. The fact remains that the City-State, focus of so many desires, was losing its northern suburbs, bought for a pittance by traders with foreign capital, tourists with multiple nationalities, cousins and nieces of the dissident General, the resurrected of the Second Republic.

To avoid lugging their loads too far, the diamond diggers preferred to wash and sift their sacks of gravel a few sheds away, beside a little river, taking only the diamonds or low-grade dust away with them. The more enterprising ones, audacious and mercenary, slung the sacks over their shoulders, or even hired slim-jims and other desperados, then braved the carjackers and crossed the City-State in search of trading houses run by tourists. There were also the itinerant trading posts, people like Requiem who, with their perfect knowledge of the system, offloaded their products anytime, anywhere.

Only Mortal Combat spoke to Lucien. The others disparaged him.

“Two-bit intellectual.”

In Mortal Combat’s family, the taste for mines and railroads was passed down from generation to generation. His great-grandfather had helped to build the first railroad and had also worked as a miner. His grandfather, a train driver by trade, spent his evenings kicking around the quarries like most of his contemporaries. It was nearly a religion at the time, after the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, mines and railroads, baby-chicks and single-mamas, Tram 83, salsa and rumba, blues, Negro-spirituals, and jazz to please for-profit tourists. His father, likewise: train driver and part-time digger. His sister ran a few baby-chicks and a two-star greasy spoon a hundred yards from the former Coal Mine. His sixth wife traded merchandise. His younger brother, who was studying fine art in Strasbourg, was bringing shame on the country, so the word went. It brought his fellow students and his teachers to tears: the poor guy drew only train tracks, locomotives, diggers with their pickaxes, and the nocturnal dances of inveterate baby-chicks. His other brothers practiced various mining and railroad-related trades, such as welder, driver’s gopher, or hawker on platform 15.

Requiem dallied with Mortal Combat's grandmother, who worked as a professional witch doctor. She helped all the inhabitants improve their chances of stumbling upon a deposit as long as they practiced the missionary position with her. It was said that the entire Tram, including the for-profit tourists, had practiced the missionary position with her. Her name cropped up in all conversations concerning black magic. She acted as a turntable between the visible world and the invisible world. The tourists queued up to see her. Russian, English, Italian, Canadian, ex-Zairian, Japanese, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, etc. She enabled them to communicate with the dead but also to increase their chances of finding the right stone. And so one saw them, in single file, jostling, shoving, capering, and insulting each other from noon to midnight, each desperately waiting his turn. Thanks to the convex glasses she placed under their faces, they were able to have a little chat with their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, even their ancestors who'd died during the very first expeditions. She told fortunes, healed broken hearts, advised them of potential deposits, predicted world events, including Obama's victory in the US presidential elections, the Pentecost Martyrs, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the attacks by Somali pirates and their pursuit by the world's navies, Ribéry's transfer to Bayern Munich, Zidane's headbutt, the death of Jonas Savimbi …

They reached their destination at thirty-five after midnight. The scouts went ahead and returned without further delay. In the meantime, he got out his notebook and scrawled: "What will they do with their teeth when there's no more grass to graze? Man proposes, God disposes. What will they do when the jujube trees grow shears? Will they eat those very shears?"

Meanwhile, Requiem recounted one of his many flings with a pre-nubile girl. They entered the facilities step by step. There was a smell of scorched earth. According to the

radio, the Voice of the Tram perhaps, the desperados swore they'd torch any human being entering the facilities, because one of their girlfriends had been caught red-handed sucking off a horde of student-miners. The problem was that they were hated by the whole of the City-State, following their succession of infamies, and they knew it.

Requiem, who was overwhelmed by inebriation, held forth. He even forgot where he'd stashed the weapons. His eight fellow-travelers, the eight beatitudes, begged the Negus to shut up. He harped on about what he called his cult film, *The Sicilian Clan*, directed by Henri Verneuil. They succeeded in pinpointing the place, and digging up the instruments. 12:52 A.M. They entered the caves. Requiem undressed hastily, urinated without delay, and turned around them six times reciting incantations.

It is said that once diggers are underground they sing songs with magic words, for several reasons: 1) To alert the deities in the event of a cave-in. 2) To shoo away the spirits of those previously entombed in the vicinity and who show up to disturb public order — Mortal Combat shared the opinion that it's the bodies that procreate the stones: "It requires men to shed their blood so that we can live off the propagated stones." 3) To find the strength to smash everything. 4) To wish for an abundant harvest from these deities.

A few moments after this ritual, the picks and shovels began their plaintive tune. They'd smoked grass beforehand. This was recommended in the City-State for long, drawn-out jobs. Mortal Combat, his breath stinking of the Tram restrooms, struck hard.

"Go stand guard," Requiem urged Lucien, before launching into an account of Jean Gabin's first film. The tunnel walls splintered around them. Dysentery and Los Caballeros, who'd come from Cuba on the trail of their ancestors, piled up the merchandise. Like a captain in the midst of battle, sitting and occasionally standing on a

mound, Requiem harangued his troops, larked about, jawed away. He was renowned for this; one of the things that earned him the title of Colonist was his capacity to make you work till you lost consciousness. “Go on, smash it, score a goal, don’t you despair, go on!” Lucien came and went, asking them to strike camp. “It’s noisy,” he said.

“What’s a weapon for?” the Negus retorted. “Let them come, they should learn you don’t climb on the bandwagon, the Neanderthals! RULE NUMBER 20: cocksuckers exist to suffer fuckups. Let them come!”

They were equipped with only a single torch. Real moles, they smashed, bashed, and hounded the stone by intuition. Requiem, who had a fine touch, ran his hands over the earth and rock, and gave directions.

“Left, right, no that’s low-grade, stick with it, guys!”

And to lighten the atmosphere, he recounted his first days in the City-State. A native of the other bit, the former country, he had come to the City-State to bury the pain of his shattered love.

He abandoned his studies for military service around the time the dissident General and his brothers started attacking the country, or what had been the country. Thanks to his ethnic origin, somebody gave him a hot tip. He had nothing to lose because the army was recruiting university students, who would now attend lectures and courses in other climes. One thing led to another, and after much thought, he joined the army without saying a word either to Lucien, his best friend, or to Jacqueline, his wife. He contented himself with sending just a postcard, twelve months after he left. Following service in Israel and Angola, he returned with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

He refused visitors. One day Lucien even undertook to go see him at general headquarters to inform him that Jacqueline, Requiem’s own wife, was going through a rough time, with no money for the rent, no cash, nothing to feed his son, his dying son. Requiem ordered Lucien to be given

a beating and incarcerated. “That’ll teach him to stick his nose into other people’s lives,” he’d said.

In the meantime, the dissident rebels attacked and seized two small towns. Requiem was therefore among the officers sent to the various fronts. According to the word on the street, Requiem and his brothers-in-arms, including the notorious child-soldiers, raped, looted, and massacred. There was talk of a soldier, a senior officer, who had sold out. To sell out means providing information to the enemy, siphoning off the men’s rations and embezzling their pay, and sending soldiers to their death by dint of changing sides.

The first rumors of his death arrived one October morning. Jaby, who’d returned to us from this war with second-degree burns, even guaranteed that before his death, the Negus had said that Lucien should take care of Jacqueline. But the same Jaby corrected his assertions. Requiem had actually said: “Lucien has stabbed me in the back!” Several months later, there were echoes that the Negus was still alive. Jaby apologized and claimed he had simply confused his face, explaining, “Over there, when the blood starts running you lose all sense of time, you forget yourself, everyone looks like one and the same person, you shit your pants, you can’t see anymore, and you find yourselves, like Siamese twins, waiting for death, and so when someone buys it, well, you get confused, right!”

In the meantime, Jacqueline had moved into Lucien’s place.

One morning, a man appeared, thin, quite thin, sweating with every step. Face of a shipwrecked sailor. The more jittery ran to hide behind the bar.

“A ghost!” they screamed.

The crowd rushed to meet him, proffered alcohol. He refused.

“What are you looking at me like that for? Leave me the hell alone!”

They understood from his first few words that a whole era was on the turn. He wasn’t dead, he repeated over and over again. He had simply fallen ill, a heart problem. Irregular breathing, nausea, chest pains.

By his own account, ten thousand dollars was the estimated price of curing his diseased heart, including surgeries and hospitalizations, for want of a transplant which would cost the army an arm and a leg and couldn’t be carried out here anyway. The military doctors advised him to return to his family. “Your illness requires the kind of care that cannot be provided here.”

He persisted.

“I’ve lost everything. No question of returning there! Where do you expect me to go? The army is all I have left.”

He dug his heels in, but they forced him to climb aboard a banana locomotive.

Itinerary: “Your hometown!” He got off at the first station, a village of some five thousand souls.

There he found accommodation with a woman twice his age. And so began the roaming, from village to village, to get treatment. The gossip doing the rounds at the time spoke of twenty or so villages whose streets he’d trodden in hope of a cure. To return home with such shaky health was out of the question. He was very much aware of all that was happening on the other side: Lucien and Jacqueline’s life together.

After four years of this contraband life, he returned to the fold. His homecoming coincided with the secession of the City-State, an event hailed by the tourists and other diggers, who excavated even in wartime. A stone rush broke out in the region occupied by the rebels. The stone was all that mattered. Every boy old enough to carry a garbage bag jumped aboard the first locomotive. The girls old enough to peddle flesh followed suit. And were right to do so, given that the Back-Country is unfortunate in having not a single iota of underground wealth. After trying

desperately to win back Jacqueline, Requiem decided in turn to make for the City-State.

They dug out seventeen sacks-worth in total. Around five in the morning, Requiem suggested they pack up, two sacks per person. Muscles straining, each managed to hoist his load onto his head, except Lucien. Mortal Combat helped him carry his burden. Five o'clock, time was flying.

Speed was of the essence to avoid getting shot in the back. The Negus led the way, Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, haranguing them.

"I'll shoot anyone who drops the merchandise."

Lucien couldn't take it anymore. He was almost sniveling. Requiem's friends laughed up their sleeves.

"My notebook!"

He realized he'd forgotten his journal near an old boxcar, where he'd been standing guard. He excused himself to go back there but Requiem was against it.

"Help us first put most of it out of reach. After that …"

They made it out the gate. Lucien put down his load and went back into the complex. Requiem muttered behind his back:

"You'll get five percent per sack, that'll teach you to chase other people's wives."

"Buy me a dress."

"Give me your pants."

"Do you have the time?"

In the distance: first light, music, fatwas, angelus bells, the laughter of the post-adolescent baby-chicks, the single-mamas with spoiled breasts, the Tram busgirls and waitresses, the strike and its students, the desperados and their dogs, the dissident rebels and their desire for rape, the local mayor bringing out his fifteen sacks of heterogenite, the publisher with a single-mama-post-baby-chick, the screeching of the rails, the tragic lamentations of the Railroad Diva, the haze, the melancholy of a life premeditated.

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20.

ARREST, OR THE BOOKS OF REVELATION, CORINTHIANS, EPHESIANS, GENESIS, GALATIANS, THESSALONIANS, AND COLOSSIANS 2:21-23.

Lucien started running like a hare through the complex of Hope Mine. He knew what awaited him in the event he was arrested. He heard something like snapping sounds behind him, but each time he turned around, there was no one there. He stumbled, lay down on his front, caught his breath. His head swam with all those tales of guys caught red-handed in Polygon 64 of Hope Mine who got beaten up. The dissident General, in one of his ten-hour speeches, of which eight and a half hours were devoted to minerals and locomotives, reiterated that nobody had the right to wander about these sites unless they had an authorization signed by his own hand. The Negus retorted with RULE NUMBER 5: both the mines and the train tracks belong to us, but there are some whose superiority complex makes them believe that life began with them, and so they appropriate our resources.

Lucien thought about everything this notebook contained, about Jacqueline and about Émilienne. Would he have made Émilienne's acquaintance if the Negus hadn't insisted he take some girls home with him that evening? He loved her like his sister, something nobody wanted to believe. There's no such thing as friendship between a man

and woman. He held her in esteem, perhaps because she was the only one of the Tram's dream girls to not necessarily seek to squeeze money out of a man. Émilienne clung to him out of hope he'd give in. But Lucien had no need whatsoever of a fling with her. He cared about his marriage to Jacqueline. He told her he was officially married and that he couldn't allow himself a one-night stand. The truth is that he was incapable of achieving closure. All the people who came to the City-State started by first achieving closure of their previous life, whether they be tourists, baby-chicks, or diggers.

The whole Tram told him that given how much he worked, and that he was still of this world, he should consume the forbidden fruit with her, for his own good. Anyone who reproached him for not flirting with the baby-chicks of Tram 83 he called a pervert. But, please, what is so perverse about picking someone up at the Tram and spending a cozy night with her, not forgetting the carnal and material advantages? What is so perverse about driving a baby-chick to the edge of ecstasy? What is so perverse about assisting through compensation a single-mama on the edge of financial misery? He said he'd never touched her, and that when he took her back to his room, he'd simply spent the night asking her questions about the City-State.

He ran for a good while more, stepped one-by-one over the high-tension lines installed at knee height. Crossed the sheds. Hurried into the cave. Nothing, except the smell of Mortal Combat's breath. He rushed outside of the subterranean gallery. A few yards away sat the locomotive on which he had stood guard. He rummaged about, picked up the notebook, and scarpered. He repeated spasmodically the prayers learned in his youth. Revelation 12, verse 3. Books of Corinthians and Malachi. Psalms 40. Genesis 8:3-9. Psalms 17. The Eternal is my light and my

salvation: whom should I fear? The Eternal is my life's strength: of whom should I be afraid?

Psalms 27, verse 1.

5:52 A.M.

He heard something like barking. He didn't know any other exits. He darted toward the gate. Opposite him, just in front of the exit, with their dogs, cigarettes, chains, whips, and sticks, the nonchalant desperados chuckled.

They walked huge dogs, despite the fact that cats, dogs, and rats (barbecued with potatoes and accompanied by chili peppers and an ice-cold beer) were hunted throughout the City-State in the same way as diamonds and chlorine. A question the tourists ask themselves: why do the needy, the homeless, vagrants, and other whackos often have huge dogs in tow? Sociologists, anthropologists, and other veterinarians have their plates full. Could they even explain this kind of eccentricity? All the suburbs were in desperate search of dogs to stuff in the oven, while these others doted on such critters despite their hunger. Perhaps a research avenue for humanities students, suggested the Negus more than once; for example: "Neighborly or Poetical Relations of an Urban Migration. Street Folk and Stray Dogs: A Socio-critical Essay."

Even the dissident General's eldest son expounded, with a jazz player's regret, on what he called "the wasted tenderness thrown into the shithouse of humanity." He explained to us that in Europe, many people own little dogs, which they shower with tenderness while he, with all the tenderness he was missing during his long journeys, yearned, alone, like the single locomotive at platform 76. He said that, what with his amputated leg, he sometimes dreamed of being a European dog, a wire fox terrier or a West Highland White Terrier, enjoying all of these expressions of tenderness. In his own words: "Just imagine, in the middle of Paris, clothes shops for dogs, food shops for dogs, playrooms for dogs, hospitals for dogs, casinos for

dogs, weight rooms for dogs, and even dogs who go on vacation, skiing, swimming, kite-flying …" He grew sadder still as he mentioned a woman who had tried to commit suicide three times because her poodle ran away. He said there was a considerable advantage in being a dog of small build: "You won't sleep outside, and women and children love you, showering you with a thousand gifts, opening their bedroom doors to you, no kennel, I mean it." All his conversations revolved around these European dogs who plunder you for human tenderness.

"Once in Paris," he said, "I was staying with a woman friend on Rue du Château, libraries and supermarkets for dogs from end to end. One Christmas afternoon, we went out for a jaunt on the Champs-Élysées. Imagine my sorrow: men, women, and children accompanied by their dogs. 'I can't bear to watch this spectacle any more. I need a little attention and love, and you just throw all that overboard!' Seeing my distress, my friend got all bogged down in explanations: 'It's hard to make you understand what I want to say to you. We are sensitive to these domestic animals who imbue our daily lives with a certain order in the exactitude of our comfort, given that we subject ourselves willingly to their ways of being and that we react to the ambiguity of our primordial identity.'"

Lucien stopped, wanted to double back.

"Evening, sirs."

They advanced toward him. The dogs chuckled.

There were around twenty of them.

"What do you want with me?"

Lucien quivered with fear.

One of them, most likely their leader:

"Where you from?"

"Please …"

The dogs continued to chuckle.

"I came accompanied by some friends and then …"

Six in the morning. It was nearly daybreak.

“If you want us to spare your life, tell us where you’ve stashed the merchandise.”

Two dogs padded forward, began sniffing at his legs.

They came closer, pulling out their arsenal of daggers, knives, bayonets, slingshots, screwdrivers.

He dumped in his pants.

Letter of the Apostles, chapter 5.

Ecclesiastes 1, verses 1 to 9.

The weapons were now over his head.

“They left with the merchandise.”

He thought of his friend, Porte de Clignancourt, striving body and soul to get him staged in Europe and Brazil.

“You having a laugh or what?”

Lucien knew there exist four kinds of desperado: 1) Those who live and sleep at the market, beggars and pickpockets, less harmful. 2) Those who hang about the station and sleep inside the locomotives, semi-harmful. 3) Those who stroll about the Tram, harmful. 4) And finally, those who operate in the mines, extremely harmful.

They are either demobilized soldiers, or adolescents from families stuck in a downward spiral, fleeing famine and other drudgeries such as “Today, it’s your turn to feed the family, shift your ass and go fetch us some palm oil, salted fish, cassava flour, and matches,” or else defrocked students.

Their age, according to the seasons and the frequency of trains at the station whose metal structure: eight to thirty. At thirty-one years old, they become suicidals or city highwaymen who’ll slit your throat once night has barely fallen.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I returned just to get this notebook.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“Please, for pity’s sake …”

“Take off your kicks!”

He took off his kicks.

“Hand over your belt!”
He handed over his belt.
“Show us your dick!”
He showed them his tackle.
“Not bad …”
The dogs …
“For pity’s sake …”
“You look like an intellectual.”
The dogs continued to chuckle.
“Please …”
“First of all recite *Mr. Seguin’s Goat.*”
He recited the first half of *Mr. Seguin’s Goat*.
They roared with laughter.
“Uncle Seguin, old Seguin …”
They roared with laughter.
The dogs …
“Take that.”
He took …
“Follow us.”
Ephesians 10.
The dogs continued to chuckle …

They tore out the first few pages of the notebook. They slipped in a few hemp leaves. They fashioned long cigars. They smoked one after another.

They discussed what they could do with this intellectual errand boy of minor diggers with rotten armpits.

“A pickaxe straight to the head.”
“He’s already dead.”
“The bastard.”
The dogs continued to chuckle …
Luke 2:17.

They exited by the large gate. The dogs continued to chuckle …

Ephesians 10.

It was nearly day, a tiny sun on the horizon. The dogs continued to chuckle …

They took Highway 2.

The dogs continued to chuckle …

The dogs continued to chuckle …

The dogs continued to chuckle …

A few passersby stopped and quickly left again, for fear of reprisals.

“Interfere, and they’ll bash your face in.”

The dogs continued to chuckle …

They handed out the worst abuse to anyone who meddled in their business.

8:37 A.M.

The dogs …

Revelation 30.

The dogs …

He dumped again.

Revelation 15.

The dogs continued to chuckle …

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21.

VIENNA CONSERVATOIRE.

They strolled with Lucien through all the streets of the City-State. The dogs continued to chuckle …

“Please …”

“Shall we give him to the mercenaries?”

They decided to hand him in at the nearest police station.

The police officers in civilian dress loudly acclaimed this patriotic act.

The chief of police, while peeling the bananas he wolfed down:

“We are here to ensure the law is upheld. This uncivic individual deserves a good hiding!”

The dogs …

“Sir, the cigarettes.”

He gave them a pack.

“Buck up, little brothers.”

“Please, my notebook.”

The head honcho hesitated, pulled out the notebook, and from it ripped a few pages he shoved down his work boots.

“Catch, you uncivic thing!”

The dogs continued to chuckle …

They hung around in the police station compound, sharing out the smokes. The chief of police dragged poor Lucien by the collar all the way to his office. There were a

few shirtless police officers in the corridors, polishing rifles and bayonets.

“Sit over there.”

Lucien sat. A ramshackle office. Several plastic chairs.

A portable radio sat prominently on a coffee table. Behind the police chief, there was an old, gigantic, black-and-white poster of the Beatles. In a corner, a garbage bag full of paperwork.

Walls yellowed with age. Ceilings, ditto. Floor, same. No window, just a fan propped up by a stick.

“What day are we?”

“Monday, sir.”

The chief of police wiped his face with his left forearm.

“You look like a nice guy, pity you’re cursed. Every Monday, we remove our tenants to the Penitentiary Center.”

“You mean to say you’re going to transfer me to the central prison?”

“Affirmative!”

The chief of police rummaged in his files, and pulled out several forms.

“State your identity!”

“Please …”

“We’re short on time.”

He stated his identity.

“Your family’s going to have a tough job springing you from here. We’re keeping a close eye on you all following the latest escapes. The locks have been strengthened.”

Lucien shook with fear.

“Can I see that notebook?”

Lucien complied.

The chief of police flicked through it rapidly, looking surprised.

“Is it you who’s distributing those leaflets?”

All the little towns and villages in the City-State lived at the pace of the leaflets the students circulated to proclaim

their indignation. They were written in a scornful, threatening tone, like ultimatums:

IF YOU DO NOT RESTORE RUNNING WATER AND ELECTRICAL POWER, WE SHALL BURN THE TRACKS, THE TRAINS, THE CHURCHES, AND THE COPPER MINES. IF THE DISSIDENT GENERAL PERSISTS, WE SHALL BURN THE CENTRAL PRISON, THE POLICE STATIONS, AND HIS SEVENTH WIFE'S HOUSE.

"I'm not a student, and anyway it's just a diary, nothing more."

He thought at length about his ranting friend, Porte de Clignancourt: "Lucien, what are you up to! All the blacks the world over are waiting desperately for you to complete this text. Chop-chop with your stage-tale, Lucien! The diaspora has run out of patience. Lucien. We blacks of France are waiting for your work to redeem us."

The chief of police stood up, and switched on his portable radio.

"Do you know Harry Belafonte?"

"Please, sir, I've done nothing wrong."

He lit a cigarette.

"'Do not allow anyone to stride about the Polygon of Hope Mine,' the very words of the Dissidence. I am merely carrying out the orders of my superiors. You would act the same way in my place. We are working under difficult conditions. You should make the task easier for us. Everyone says they're innocent. Unfortunately, I can do nothing for you."

"Sir …"

He changed the frequency of his radio, different shows, horse race results.

"Gilberto … Gilberto … Gilberto!"

He called for the soldier supposed to be standing honor guard outside his door. Gilberto didn't reply. He scribbled some numbers at random on a scrap of paper.

"Can you do me a favor?"

"Sir."

"I'm betting on a horse race at Vincennes. The horses have been playing tricks on us the last few months. I've picked in order number 9, number 15, number 6, number 21, number 7. I'm hesitating between number 16, number 35, and number 9, what do you think?"

"Choose number 16."

Laughter from the chief of police, who was sweating like a pork chop on a plate.

"You might be right, I was also thinking of number 16. But why 16?"

"I was born on the 16th of May 1953."

"My wife was also born on a 16th. My ex, I mean."

He looked at him closely, and raised his arms to heaven like an explorer discovering a lost civilization.

"Just a vodka and ten pesos and I'll let you leave."

"I don't have a penny, and even if I did, I hate informing, corruption."

Lucien didn't back down — what a guy! You have the chance to be let off, but stubbornly you continue to wallow in theories without legs or backbones. What future is there for a fella like that, a real chickenshit! If it was Requiem, he would negotiate his release without seeking unnecessary complication. Lucien, what a nutcase. All the Tram's baby-chicks fantasized about him. They adored him, wanted to flirt with him, venerated him, enticed him. They stated, loud and clear, that he was the kindest man on earth. They were at his feet, imploring him: "Take us to your bed, we've never fucked an intellectual, let alone a writer." But Lucien, beyond shame, took refuge in his texts, cloistered himself in his literature, quit the Tram when it was barely 10 P.M., refused to dance with the busgirl with

fat lips who never took her eyes off him, while the rest of us daydreamed about such popularity among womankind. All these incongruities annoyed Requiem, for whom “Lucien,” to quote him, “is an insult to virility.”

Ever since an ethnologist had made a trip to Europe with a baby-chick, all the Tram girls pursued those few intellectuals who loafed about the City-State. They told anyone who’d listen that they too would find themselves an intellectual and that they’d go away with him — far from the Tram, far from the City-State, far from us — to Prague, Odessa, Zagreb, Budapest, Belgrade. That they would marry in great style, give birth to very beautiful children, then return to the Tram to ridicule the diggers, boycott the busgirl with fat lips, and get their revenge on the tourists who had felt up their breasts without paying the check. In bed, and even in the Tram’s mixed restrooms, they subtly modified the chronology of the foreplay when the client proved to be an intellectual. “Stroke my navel first and, while we’re at it, tell me about the Second World War. Teach me mathematics.”

The chief of police spoke without letup, argued, furnished his own view of the City-State, recalled his exploits during one of the many wars of liberation, criticized the Americans, and entangled Lucien in his contradictions.

“If you don’t make a gesture, what are my children going to eat?”

“You call that justice?”

“Yes.”

“I deplore …”

“One vodka and ten dollars, and freedom beckons.”

“I won’t sing from your hymn sheet!”

The chief of police began to laugh.

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in!”

Gilberto with a bottle.

“For you, sir.”

“Fall out!”

The chief of police rummaged in the garbage bag. An old cloth. He took two glasses that he wiped in the twinkle of an eye.

“You know, I’m the only one on this earth to still have his head on his shoulders. Sometimes I wonder how I do it. You deserve the gallows, all of you. You can go tell the dissident General that. I didn’t study law to show off, and I deliver justice in my own way. Do you know how much —”

“No thank you.”

Lucien pushed away the glass the chief of police held out to him.

“Do you know the pain I must endure when I find myself with individuals like you? Potentially innocent.”

The chief of police knocked back the first glass in one go. He picked up his portable radio and a cassette tape, *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh and the Maiden Fevroniya*, by Rimsky-Korsakov.

“I love classical music. Each note contributes to a work of speleology, the speleology of the soul. What sensitivity, what depth! I was saying … I don’t know if you understand me … I am a father and you are not unaware that we no longer receive anything from this government. If I don’t make a move or if you refuse to budge, how do you expect me to make ends meet? I’m not like you guys and I don’t have the time to stroll about the mines. I am torn by my conscience. I accept gratuities from those I reckon innocent and I release them immediately. When I saw you, a spirit told me you were innocent, hence your presence in my office. The others, we don’t even do any paperwork. We chuck them in, period. But your family must have some clue regarding the initial steps to take. They should already set aside a nice, fat bribe. No nonsense, I’m serious. And if you’ve got sisters, don’t think twice. They can get your case progressed quite fast, I mean really fast!”

“I understand, but—”

The chief of police remained motionless, right hand over his heart.

“I love this part, listen to the spoken chorus, the splendor …”

He put down his glass, energetically rubbed his head.

“I can feel something truly …”

Lucien took advantage of his rapture to pour himself a shot.

“This music, it’s quite insane! It’s his masterpiece, just listen to that dialogue between the singing and the orchestra. The Russian Revival exhilarates me. He completed this monumental work after five years of hard toil. Can we go now?”

“Where?”

“You said no to my gratuity.”

“…”

Lucien stood up.

The music lover closed his files. He switched off the device. Opened his drawers. A belt.

“Hold this.”

He asked his prisoner to follow him.

“Thank you.”

They walked along damp, gloomy corridors, at the end of which …

“If you ever feel like discussing music, just let me know. Come and we’ll chat. I’m sure you’ll muddle through, you’re a winner, that’s obvious.”

… a dark room with bars. The very smell of a slave ship. An infernal noise.

“I beg you!”

Arms, legs, insults, wailing, shrill laughter, preaching, the self-assurance, warmth, pride, and majesty of a piano’s brushed ivories.

“My pleasure to have made your acquaintance.”

A salsa variant belted out by an individual as a sign of protestation.

“I exempt you from all torture.”

He wanted to explain himself but the police officers didn’t give him time.

“Sir, chief …”

In the blink of an eye, they opened the metal gate and pushed him in.

The guy shrieking his salsa broke off his rebellious lyricism to present his compliments, amid an unimaginable hubbub:

“Please accept, dear newcomer, our most harmonious and heartfelt greetings!”

Around six in the evening, five vans came to remove them to the former central prison.

The chief of police whispered a few words to him.

“You’ll muddle through, my man!

“I hope so.”

He was regularly overwhelmed by this crowd of villains and pathetic innocents he had to deal with before transferring them to the thirty-eight or so jails of the City-State, including the famous Penitentiary Center. In one day they locked up six, sometimes even ten people in a grimy cell forty-five feet square, where they would have to wait a good week before giving way to fresh arrivals.

Quite apart from the cramped conditions, they suffered from several diseases and were dying of hunger, desperate for a vodka accompanied by a leg of dog or simply the eternal need to renew oneself with a baby-chick with massive-melon-breasts.

The chief of police had been so keen to share his weakness for classical music that he had eventually rigged up some speakers down in the hole, and adhered to a strict broadcast schedule. Monday, from midnight, Stravinsky and Bach. Tuesday, round about eight in the evening, Tchaikovsky followed by Dmitri Shostakovich. Wednesday,

after work-duty weeding his sugar cane plantation, Mozart's *Vesperae solennes de confessore*. Thursday, time for the Strauss family. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, either Gregorian chants or the Beatles or Alexander Konstantinovich Glazunov or Chopin or Sergei Rachmaninov.

The tragedy is that in such a situation, they experienced no urge to lend an ear to this music lover's collection: his jail was appositely nicknamed the Vienna Conservatoire, and the music had nothing to do with the national salsa, hence this new race of prisoners who sang at the tops of their voices in a show of protestation.

"I recommend the last Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev. You'll muddle through, believe me."

Lucien gave a forced laugh and replied.

"I hope I will."

"I'm only doing my duty."

"Thank you, sir."

The chief of police stood watching the prisoners, their wrists handcuffed, stuffed into the vans like sacks of gravel. Like on platform 17, the station that is essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that call to mind the railroad built by Stanley.

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22.

IN PRAISE OF TORTURE.

Torture is one of the demarcation points between an organized banana republic and a chaotic, or in other words disorganized, banana republic. Lucien was not unaware of this. Hence his fear at finding himself in the police chief’s ramshackle office. The former country, which now exists only on paper, was an organized banana republic. The torturers officiated in very good conditions. They had several implements of torture to hand, including racks and wheelbarrows. They were sent on training courses and work experience placements outside the country. These monsters viewed the detainee’s body as a thing, a doodad, an apparatus, even a work of art. They mastered every recess of the human anatomy and applied their torture with genius and finesse. Over time, a certain rapport developed, a mutual respect or grim trust between the jailer and their victim. The latter even became superior to their wrongdoer once they realized that their torturer was at their service, was not torturing at random, and had been hired for this nasty job, often from among the intellectual cream of society.

The City-State possessed all the characteristics of a disorganized banana republic. The guys who tortured in the various jails were all minor upstarts, plucked from here and there in the course of the many wars of liberation. They

were, for the most part, university-less students, self-trained journalists, diggers, former child-soldiers, desperados, and lazy mercenaries. They owned no torture instruments, no rack, no cable worthy of the name. They were ignorant of the basic techniques, with the exception of water-boarding, which they applied in approximate fashion.

Often they restricted themselves to hitting detainees with sticks and stools. Yet torture is above all an art, an artistic discipline just like literature, cinema, or contemporary dance. All the detainees in the City-State ghettos bitterly missed the torturers of yesteryear, those monsters who worked with the precision of a Swiss watchmaker. Lucien, who in times past had joined every single protest march, could not bear the idea, even in his most fleeting dreams, of ending up behind bars, whatever the torturers.

If it wasn’t for Émilienne, he would have remained in his dingy cell till kingdom come.

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23.

AT THE TRAM TO IDENTIFY WITH THE MUSIC OF THE WHITES, TO SPEND HOURS IN ENDLESS DEBATE, AND TO SNACK ON DOG AND MUSHROOM KEBABS, WITH BRAZZA BEER TO WASH IT ALL DOWN.

Émilienne suggested a meeting at the Tram, where the friend-enemies could defuse the bomb between them over several rounds of beer.

Requiem refused.

“I dislike Lucien!”

She tasked Mortal Combat with undertaking the negotiations. He had to convince the protagonists of the necessity of this evening of boozing. He willingly agreed, nurturing wild ideas about those breasts of hers that fueled so many debates regarding the anatomy of the female body.

Requiem recanted, on condition he be accompanied by his whole gang, who drank your beer like you have no idea. Lucien dithered as usual.

“Do you have the time?”

This was the atmosphere in which they agreed a night and time, coinciding with the Railroad Diva’s concert. Mortal Combat got there first, to request a rapid service from the busgirls, in light of the circumstances of the meeting.

The drink was served. Émilienne excused herself.

Requiem and his disciples addressed the writer:

“Dickhead.”

Their conversation turned to the detainees and writers who wheel and deal in Hope Mine, get caught, are freed by women, and lack the energy to end up in the sack with them. They laughed like little kids while applause rained down upon the Diva.

The publisher came and sat at their table. He plied the victim with questions, leaving him no time to respond.

“And my stage-tale? What did you do with my characters? Have you managed to reduce them by half?”

Poor Lucien; in the middle of all this he remembered his buddy, Paris, 18th Arrondissement, Porte de Clignancourt, who was waiting for these same texts.

“Foreplay is like democracy, as far as I’m concerned. If you don’t caress me, I’ll call the Americans.”

He rang from a call shop. Since he was forever crippled by debt, he sought to control his costs by endeavoring to remind Lucien of all his obligations in less than a minute. The phone conversation therefore lasted only fifty-six or fifty-eight seconds at the most, for as a rule, in France and everywhere else, the manager of the booth adds a minute for any excess seconds. He had to spit it all out in under sixty seconds for fear of using one minute and a bit, and being forced to pay for two. To avoid any unpleasant surprises, he scrawled his message on a scrap of paper. As soon as Lucien picked up the phone, the Clignancourt man started yelling as fast as possible, like a journalist commentating on the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman boxing match. The message was blunt, stripped neatly of any frills such as “hello,” “how are you?”, or “speak soon.” Each second equated to fifty words. A thousand words per phone call to galvanize this damned Lucien. Before dialing the writer’s number, he gulped some water to quench his thirst, concentrated, breathed deeply, focused on the functionality of each of his muscles, and withdrew from the world. He was right to do so.

The call shop he patronized was always overcrowded. Distinctive characteristics: women with sniveling infants demanding tits and other appetizers. The hardest to brave was not the baroque concerto of brats but the clamoring of their mothers and other customers incapable of yakking on the phone at less than full volume. He was a sight to see, the Clignancourt man, telephone jammed fiercely to his left ear, forefinger of the dextral hand plugging his right.

Meanwhile, the Negus and his disciples let rip with the jeers.

“He says he’s a writer even though he sponges off a decrepit-former-single-mama!”

The Diva, bursts of …

Only Mortal Combat stood up for him.

“You’re shooting a dead horse.”

“Someone is slogging their guts out to give you a leg up, and you’re content to sleep on your little laurels.”

“The stage-tale, Lucien, do it quick!”

God didn’t forget his own. The carnival passed by the Tram, after the Cuba Club and the Singapore bar-restaurant.

“I’m never taking my eyes off you!”

The publisher vanished.

As did the Negus’s gang, but without the Negus.

Lucien, in his notebook, scrawled: “The single-mama-chicks, heaving breasts and tragic thighs, entice the for-profit tourists, and make these sleepwalking migrations their credo.”

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24.

LOCOMOTIVE LITERATURE …

Lucien was keen to talk with the Diva. He invited her to sample some kebabs at their table. She suggested they go sit outside. Which delighted the Negus, since it was customary to establish a causal relationship between the kebabs and the dog in its raw state. Requiem was not alone in nurturing such ideas. Equation: the more of the slaughter you witness, the more your appetite increases.

Many customers preferred to see the dog they were to eat have its throat cut in their presence. They drank. They smoked. They fueled their infatuations in the mixed facilities of the Tram. They chatted. They got up to go check on the cooking procedures. The various comings and goings were facilitated by such proximity.

“Do you have the time?”

Requiem placed his order without consulting his table companions.

“Dog thigh with mustard. Appetizers: four grilled rats, no salt.”

“I hate foreplay.”

The chef and his acolytes arrived at dusk with the cooking utensils and the animals stocked on two trolleys, trussed up like bundles of sticks, wire through the muzzles, various tins. They did their work some ten yards from the main entrance. The liturgy always followed the same

chronology: either the animal was thrown into a vat of boiling water still trussed or it was stunned with an iron bar or it was hung in such a way that it died slowly while the skin was artistically removed, apparently to be used to make shoes in the cold countries of Europe. What a boon, this proximity, poetics of distance!

Lucien addressed the Diva hanging on Requiem's every word as he prattled about his exploits and his keenness to up sticks.

"I am at present contemplating the concept of 'locomotive literature,' inspired by your talented self."

The Diva smiled:

"Come, you can be straight with me."

"I would really like to work with you."

Requiem gave a little cough.

"Go on."

Lucien took out a scrap of paper and prepared to read.

Requiem, who didn't want Lucien to speak, gave him a hard look then lost himself in his movie ramblings.

"You seen Jean Gabin in *Pasha*? How that guy fills the screen! He reminds me of Lino Ventura in *The Great Spy Chase* except that …"

Lucien felt offended.

"Good evening."

He got up to leave, but the Diva caught him by the sleeve of his jacket and apologized. He regained his composure and carried on with his little locomotive tales.

"Locomotive literature or train literature or tram literature or rail literature or railroad literature or literature of the iron road, my writing displays similarities with the railroads that depart from the station that is essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that call to mind the railroad built by Stanley. I discovered this one night, as I was taking a stroll on platform 10. You had a show, and your voice, long like the rain, reached me, impelled me to

reflect, to faint, to explode, to curse myself, to come apart at the seams, in front of everyone."

Requiem, interfering:

"That old Ventura, you gotta see him in his final film!"

Lucien:

"I realize that in my sentences I desperately seek the breaths of life that those trains have, the trains from here. The poise, the pride, the fury of a rabid dog, the dilapidation, and the rust they bear. I seek in my sentences the romance they exhibit and haul about. Anyway, I've had a weakness for railroads for a while now. I sought man, I found train. (Laughter) If it was up to me alone, I would spend my whole life in stations, savoring the passengers' voices, their comings and goings, the gliding, grating, droning of the boxcars, the atmospheres and ambiences peculiar to our brother diggers and students hungry for solitude."

Requiem, losing his composure:

"That old Lino Ventura, you gotta see him in his final film!"

The Diva, so beautiful:

"I use recorded sounds that reflect my own. I was born on a train, so my adopted mother told me. Train tracks, the road, train tracks, exile, you see what I mean? I have never been a talented singer. It was the sight of the station that drove me to seek the relics buried beneath my skin. Initially to satisfy my belly, for I required red wine, hams, and pieces of bread at all cost. Later there grew in me a kind of rage to devise my own genealogy."

Requiem continued to talk, laughing away to scramble the conversation.

"*Maledetto Ferragosto*, his final …"

The Diva, hanging on:

"What do you want with me?"

Lucien, as if in a cloud:

“I plan to read and perform my texts over recorded railroad sounds, your recorded sounds. It will be a question of finding a creative space, me and my texts, you and your voice.”

The Diva:

“You don’t say.”

Requiem, scared that Lucien would steal the show from him, weighed into the discussion:

“Whenever I step into a boxcar, I still see my grandfather and his forebears making poor guys like me work under a blazing sun. The iron roads appall me, the disgust you feel after having gone with a baby-chick who explains during the act that she is in this no man’s land of existence because her life equates to the fifteenth commandment: you will eat by the sweat of your thighs — stay horny and persevere!”

Everyone knew that Requiem disliked any talk of the history of humanity, so to speak, since it reminded him of the many tales regarding his origins. His childhood friends, with the exception of Lucien, harped on about how his mother came from Angola, how his father was a Greek ship-owner, and how his grandfather apparently lost his life during the construction of the railroad. He never tolerated allusions being made to his childhood. He became aggressive, abusive, called the diggers as witnesses, swore to teach you to mind your tongue.

He had opposed the Authenticity movement by renouncing his surname. In short, as he said himself, “To be rid of a veil that stops you peacefully enjoying your beer.” But why this complex?

The poem he had declaimed at the National University, as a manifesto for the ideology of rupture with the umbilical cord, had been written by Lucien. That day, the Law lecture hall was jam-packed with students carrying banners, yelling “Authenticity! Authenticity!” as Requiem reeled off his “Requiem For A Dead City:”

I am done with roots that bind me to lost forebears
in the bush and other cesspits of History.
I care little for a past that halts halfway.
May they leave me free to live the urgency of my fate!
May they leave me free to devise my solar system!
Who ever said I owe them a recompense come month's end?
I am malaria,
I am the tree that obscures the forest,
I shall not yield my fruits before the dry season.
Be free of it?
I revoke the blood tie.
I fell my family tree!
Enough of begging for a path now obsolete!
Requiem for insolence.
Requiem for a life with no preamble.

Was Requiem not ultimately Lucien's double? Distanced, thousands of miles from each other, by dramas, fissures, and follies, how did they manage to live under the same roof? Some wagging tongues were abrupt in their appraisal. They are children of the same father, whether they like it or not.

Lucien:

"These recorded sounds are historical monuments, works of literature, poems, tragedies. Through the rust and other elements, you can feel history, the history of peoples, the memory of migration."

Requiem (running out of steam):

"Listen, Lucien …"

The Diva (joyously):

"I think your idea is brilliant!"

Requiem (almost angry):

“Lucien, can you do me a favor? Go call me that baby-chick, over there!”

Lucien held out.

“Just to read bits of my texts over the recorded sounds, your recorded sounds, which invite me into true debauchery, the debauchery of the mind, which has nothing to do (he stared hard at the Negus and emphasized the words) with your descents into vileness that drive me to ecstatic revolt.”

Requiem, disoriented:

“Lucien, can we talk about something else?”

The Diva grasped the Negus’s ploy.

“Can you come over here?”

They stepped aside to converse. Requiem seized the opportunity to drink the soup and beer they had left. To appease his ire, he instructed the services of a baby-chick. They hurried toward the mixed facilities.

Lucien stirred us to jealousy. He annoyed us. All the girls held him in high regard. The waitresses and the busgirls whispered that he was a good sort. The mother superior lusted after him. The tourists wanted him to work with them at all costs, and paid his checks.

They came back from the facilities, sweating and laughing, the baby-chick with her crumpled little skirt.

“I feel relieved.”

Lucien and the Diva returned after nearly an hour of conversation.

Requiem let rip at his friend:

“What were you getting up to with our famous Diva?”

The Diva, ironically, to show her mettle:

“I love that! Come dance with your famous Diva.”

Inside the Tram, there was salsa.

“No thanks. I can’t dance.”

How’s it possible a guy that age could have difficulty jiving to beautiful music like this? And what’s more, with such a supreme and beautiful creature as the Diva? What

shame we felt! Unheard of since the history of humanity began! You're acting like we were in the Bible but we're not. The Negus stared at him. Anger and desolation in his gaze.

Requiem raised his voice:

"Come here! Come dance with me, or I'll smash your face in!"

The Diva spat on the ground:

"I won't sully myself."

Requiem, insolent:

"Bitch!"

Lucien, lost in his texts: "So whenever I write, it feels like my age is reduced by half, or even fifteen, seventeen, perhaps thirty-five years. It feels like I am returned to the belly of my mother and therefore have no one to answer to. I forget, in turn, my ragged clothes and my tuberculosis and my setbacks and my old pairs of shoes."

Be clear, dear Lucien, what does "returned to the belly" mean? Sink into depression? Refuse to munch the lovely dog kebabs with chopped pistachios? Flee the events that befall you? Not raid the Polygon? Live by sponging off others? That's crazy behavior, Lucien. You're lying. You've never been yourself since you trod the ground of the City-State! You've never been yourself since always!

He hiccupped and continued: "I write therefore I come … But unfortunately, my orgies are never eternal! My conscience always rouses me, disturbs me, tells me 'Return to your text.' This is, I think, the most difficult stage in the chronology of a text, to return to it and this time not with the euphoria of a maize beer or even the attitude proper to a night of transgression, but with the honesty and probity of an honest family man.

"This is the moment you realize that the text is without onions, that the soup is excessive, that the carrots aren't cooked, that the lack of spices considerably affects the advent of a good cuisine. You realize that a major extract is

cheating, that such and such a sentence has stinging eyes, that the subordinate clauses are plundering the serenity of the rhythm, that the characters are wrecking their fate and dicing with depression, that the title lacks charm or, in the worst cases, that the story, shall we say the plot, shall we say the framework of the text, doesn't hold up and that the text must either be redone or else fed to the dogs and other scavengers of the Second Republic who, after having breakfasted, lunched, suppered, siesta'd, dined, and barbecued, wait, tongues hanging out, for the manna which shall fall from this heaven they have vilified, a musical score of madness."

The Negus, insolently, while lighting a cigarette:

"Bitch!"

"Are you a little shy?"

"Want to dance with me?"

The Diva is like a witch. When she looks at you, not only are you unable to tolerate her gaze but you also feel like she's acquainted with your life, that she's more acquainted with it than you, that she knows how you'll answer, with which baby-chick you slept last night, where and at what time you defecated, for which tourist you're digging. It feels like she's even influencing your answers.

"It's just that I'm a little tired."

She persisted:

"Humor me, Lucien."

"Bitch."

"Please …"

"Bitch."

For several minutes we remained with the smoke and rage of the Negus, the cowardice and indifference of Lucien writing his nonsense, the beauty and uneasiness of the Railroad Diva, inhaling despair and things impossible to express.

"The bitch."

Suddenly, screams from inside the Tram, mixed with crying. We rushed inside.

A press of people all about and within the mixed restrooms.

The bodies of two young baby-chicks lay on the wooden floor, pale and lifeless. Two diggers taking advantage or attempting desperately to give mouth-to-mouth. The tourists with their telephones alerting ambulances that came no more, the waitresses requesting their tips, the musicians continuing to play, the baby-chicks quarreling over a tourist.

“Do you have the time?”

“You look like my ex-boyfriend.”

“Give me five shillings.”

“Come, and I’ll teach you some tales for grownups.”

“With or without rubbers.”

“Take me to Warsaw.”

“I’ve got a silicone bust.”

“I’m not like the others who peddle counterfeit feelings. With me, you’ll never forget it!”

The rumors. Three versions: 1) They were knocked up, they had taken pills to abort, the perpetrators of these knockings-up were second-rate tourists. 2) They had taken a deadly poison to say no to the existence they were condemned to lead. 3) They had gone to see a soothsayer to acquire the gift of enticement and he had instructed them not to sample any dog kebabs; yet the entire Tram had seen them snacking on dog, washed down with tequila and tropical vodka. Account favored by the mercenaries who carried away the bodies while chairs, trash bags, shovels, picks, tables, and bottles flew. Psalms 12:45. And yet the night had started well! Injured by a projectile, Lucien under a table, in his notebook, wrote: “Nebulous bodies drift through the dust of their toilet-less lives.”

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25.

DIVA: A LOCOMOTIVE LIFE, A REBEL AGAINST THE GALES OF HISTORY AS WELL AS THE GEOGRAPHY OF LOSS. NIGHT OF ALCOHOL: THE DIVA IS A WOMAN WHO GIVES MEN OF MANY NATIONALITIES THE CHANCE TO LEAVE THEIR BODIES FOR THE SPACE OF A TREMOLO.

She bore a curious resemblance to Maria Callas, in her face as much as in her performance and vocal range. Her captivating voice drove the tourists to inextinguishable raptures. Her hairstyle. The tremolo of her laugh and her warmth for the audience. Her eyes that flickered as if she were delving into the pasts, the rackets, the cave-ins, the raids on the Polygon, the long and slow desires to consecrate cults and monuments to the Merovingians and other lecheries: desire to fuck in the dark, transgression raised to the rank of the noblest virtues, transactions and other partnership agreements sealed between two vodkas, merchandise, kebabs that in a certain era were called still lives, secondhand fish dating from the 1990s and shifted from one cold room to another, from one country to another, from one continent to another before winding up in the grubby bar-restaurant-brothels of the City-State, despite the Dissidence declaring it a beacon of national reconstruction and the fight against famine, a revolution of modernity, and so on and so forth.

She had arrived in the City-State almost by chance. She thought she'd reach Nigeria, with the hope of working in a large hotel in Lagos, as she liked to recall in the introduction to each show, but fate had decided otherwise. She'd realized she could only survive in this hardboiled town thanks to her vocal cords, and had attempted the impossible, with such dedication that she made it through. At the start of her career, she was the laughing stock of the Tram — Little Red Riding Hood they called her. Then came the recorded sounds, then her cheery songs, which conferred a certain happiness, then a certain international recognition. What was her ancestry? Her face, Asia — so Thailand, Cambodia, or even India, maybe Pakistan. How did she manage to speak forty-eight languages including Romanian, Etruscan, German, Russian, Wolof, Polish, and Amazigh? Something of the gypsy, or baroness, about her, a sort of fallen bourgeoisie, or pleb seeking modernity, with the appearance of a peacock to crown it all.

The tourists who meddled in her genealogy attempted to win her favor with their beers, luxury cars, villas, mines.

"You are radiant in that lush green dress! Would Madame, or is it Mademoiselle, like to keep us company?"

"Most kind."

She tactfully declined their offers. Diva! The Diva, the Diva! yelled the Tram, the whole of Tram 83, as one, then as a scattered choir.

No girl in living memory had achieved as much success as this young woman. Fights broke out before and after each concert. Everyone claimed she came from their country of origin. Everyone swore she was their sister. Every man wanted to end up in her bed.

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26.

LUCIEN AND MALINGEAU: A USELESSLY IDIOTIC PAIR.

You can bet Lucien was the only person not to feel the weight of the crisis caused by the dissident General. Each time his erection failed him, the General closed the mines. He could deprive us of excavating for two weeks whenever he was incapable of satisfying the baby-chicks in his teeming harem. His caprices affected the boozing at the Tram. Sour faces all round: the waitresses and the busgirls, the baby-chicks, the mercenaries, the slim-jims, the desperados, the second-rate tourists.

A spoiled child, fed and lodged by Requiem, what else did he have to do but produce those lines that annoyed us so, as he filled his notebooks with them, even though the situation smelled of trouble? Passing a train disgorging its load, he ran into Mortal Combat, who had merchandise to deliver and greeted him.

“Evening, sir.”

“I’m no sir.”

“What you up to?”

“I like to meld with the sounds of our trains. A health walk.”

“Ah! Well *we* don’t go walking without purpose. We dig, we delve, no downtime for us! It even depresses me that individuals who are supposed to be busy indulge in this activity that offers nothing in return!”

He raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll leave you to your daydreaming.”

“Where you off to?”

“To the Tram. A beer. Maybe a session with a baby-chick.”

Lucien stopped to write. By which time Mortal Combat had crossed the rails.

“Wait for me.”

He caught up to him, out of breath.

“I’ve got a work session at the Tram, with my publisher.”

“Got a cigarette?”

“No.”

He took out his notebook.

“Wait up, just one paragraph.”

“You don’t smoke, you don’t screw, you don’t eat dog, you don’t raid the Polygon, you don’t deliver merchandise, you flee the girls, you don’t take liquor, I wonder what you do in life!”

Instead of getting annoyed, retaliating, jumping on Mortal Combat, he simply gave a little smile. What a man!

“Do you have the time?”

“What do you want? Haven’t you heard about this crisis!”

In front of the Tram, they were waylaid by a bevy of girls, full makeup, dressed like the circus.

“Clear off!”

Lucien stopped to apologize for what he felt were far too harsh words to be directed at these young people. Mortal Combat stopped too and shoved him with his shoulder.

“I can understand why Requiem takes you for a space alien.”

They went in.

The Tram was so full that the customers spilled out down the railroad line. The Diva was performing Piaf over her endless prerecorded sounds. Which pleased Lucien, who blurted out his idea, even before taking a seat:

“We are planning a duet.”

The publisher sighed.

“This girl has nothing to teach you.”

“It’s just an idea, nothing more!”

“Her crocodile voice disgusts me.”

He didn’t eat dog, the publisher. He ordered some for Lucien. But the writer canceled it.

“I’d prefer a bottle of beer. Not hungry enough.”

Back in the day, one hundred and ninety-three dogs a week were slaughtered in the sector of Hope Mine alone. A period when the American organization Save The Dogs In Africa estimated that thirty-two percent of dog was eaten in Vampiretown, forty-five percent in the Carbonades district, and twenty-three in South Camp.

They had come with German shepherds trained to understand and carry out everything they were told, in order to spread awareness of the dog issue, forgetting that, with a few exceptions, all the meat in the City-State came from dead dog and horse. It was said that these German shepherds could count from one to ten, that they walked on two legs, that they whispered lullabies, that they could switch on a television, that they knew how to make coffee, that they could read, and write. The same sources intimated having glimpsed them with their masters in the quarries for business dealings. The tourists from the American organization Save The Dogs In Africa were crazy about the Tram.

Requiem arrived with a flag of an Eastern European country.

The busgirls brought the drinks.

“Tip.”

We learned that one night some baby-chicks who had been conspiring with the diggers had spiked the Americans’ drinks with particular roots that send you to sleep, and once they’d been rendered incapable of lifting so much as their little finger, the girls grabbed the keys to

their apartment, their clothes, their cell phones, their dogs — in short, the kidneys with mushrooms that twenty-four hours later were being eaten at the Singapore club-restaurant and for a brothel breakfast at the Exquisite Pleasures of the Lonely Griots, on platform 17 of the station whose metal structure was essentially … Without greeting us, the Negus stuck his fingers roughened by a life of debauchery into his neighbor's dish. Mortal Combat joked that his fingers merited a prize of some sort: they had entered every place a finger could intervene …

"Not too cooked."

The Americans lodged complaints that went unheeded. How can you identify three baby-chicks in a town that has a thousand? There was talk of diplomatic relations getting all fouled up if the criminals weren't found.

They kicked up a huge fuss, before taking a train for the Back-Country, where they arrived without luggage; a stunt pulled, so it was said, by the same diggers, who were surely digesting those German shepherds with mushrooms, followed by a vodka and a round of pleasures of the underbelly at the closest Paradise cathouse, masterfully managed by Mother Eugenia, Christelle's paternal aunt.

"How are my characters getting on?"

"Not bad. I have succeeded in reducing them by half."

He handed his publisher a manuscript, which he flipped through as quickly as possible.

"I can see ten characters here; what the hell are the eight others doing? I told you to turn out a text with two characters!"

Laughter from Requiem.

"But, sir, the last time I saw you with my text, remember what you told me: reduce the twenty characters to ten and I'll publish you! It's what I've attempted by removing a good chunk of the story."

"Listen, Lucien …"

"But, sir …"

He gingerly leafed through the first few pages.

“Remember, sir …”

“You there,” said the Negus to the publisher, “I came for the affair in question.”

A horde of baby-chicks.

“Gentlemen, need some company, to make you forget your women who lack initiative and creativity …”

At Tram 83, it was impossible to converse without being interrupted! What with the crisis and the confrontations that saw us rowing with each other, the baby-chicks had become more aggressive and demanding, going as far as tugging you by the shirt. “And what are we going to eat if you insist on keeping to your little selves?”

“Go away!”

“Give us a hundred.”

“Do you have the time?”

A busgirl arrived with Requiem’s bottle.

Lucien took out his notebook, wrote: “They vitriolically demand their rights and obligations, these girls, but beyond their wrath, you feel they don’t care about the future, that they live a life of luxury: the proof is in the branded clothes they slip into, and their lips, gilded like a joy to entice our own. I wonder how they get by. The crisis lingers. They complain but end up drinking, playing poker, laughing, singing, vaunting their silicone breasts, scolding the second-rate tourists despite the latter’s animosity. Does a more dressed-up poverty exist, or is poverty a supreme joy in disguise?”

“I want my tip, sir.”

“Allowing that I accept this text, with its ten characters, don’t you see how they lurch between the lines?”

“Not too cooked, those kidneys.”

“If you don’t give us a little money, we’ll stay right here!”

“Hey little one, your bosom’s making me lurch, ain’t that so Lucien?”

“Tip.”

Imagine the atmosphere: the pantyless-girlies, the busgirl, Lucien, the publisher, the laughter of the surrounding diggers, and the murmuring of a row of baby-chicks by the mixed restrooms, hanging on the rails of our famous Diva.

“But sir, you’ve not even read the text and you’re passing judgment on it.”

“Listen, my man, your characters don’t seem like they can hold it together on stage!”

“You’re already thinking about the staging?”

“They’re not very believable, they’re ashamed of existing. They shun us. I’m not saying there’s no text …”

“Give us a hundred.”

“Tip …”

“Is it about you, that thing?”

“That’s where we should be starting from. Look, you haven’t even read it yet and already you’re —”

“Listen, Lucien …”

“With respect, sir, your remarks are out of place, I mean really! The story takes place in a station. The play is divided into platforms. There are ten platforms, so ten tableaux. Ten characters who don’t know each other are waiting for a single individual. Actually, one might say that they know each other through a third party. And the whole play builds with their plans, dreams, memories, sympathies, and hatreds vis-à-vis the guy who’s coming.”

“Tip …”

“I’m not that keen on the plot and the characters. Or maybe if you extend to twenty characters for greater visibility.”

“Sir …”

“Gentlemen, we’ve got what it takes to give you crazy pleasure.”

“I’m saying that your text will corrode the train tracks and the history of the first mine. Literature is something

other than what you see. People are fed up with this kind of drivel. We know everything about trains, so go take shelter from your inspiration."

"I thank you for everything, dear sir."

He got up, to the delight of the baby-chicks who saw him as a potential client.

"I've got a proposition for you, a different proposition."

"Meaning?"

"Africa is of no interest to many intellectuals; let's just say it's not as exotic as it was four hundred years ago. My proposition is that you resubmit this same text to me but with the action taking place in Colombia. FARC, the jungle, you see what I mean? Take that as your context. Set the story in the jungle."

"If you're done, Lucien, I've gotta chat with this guy. You're not going to make us hang about just for literature? Wow, you (addressing the publisher), I didn't know that under your pith helmet you dwelled so much on …"

"Recreate the same characters; they need a heart in order to walk. Write with your guts. Invest in their trials and tribulations. Imagine some orgy scenes. Make their lives burlesque and realist at the same time: to strike the right balance, in a purely Colombian context."

"I see what you mean. But what do I do with this text?"

"You're a writer and you're asking me what you should do with your text?"

He thought about his friend, Porte de Clignancourt, who ranted and raved each time because Lucien was lagging behind with his writing, while the guy exhausted himself making contacts with Paris theaters. Fair enough, but had anybody forced him into exile? Had anybody asked him to go study astrology? Does it serve any purpose in a country where you only eat every two days? After his glittering university achievements, the guy found himself joining the ranks of the unemployed, like ninety percent of the Republic's population. A few months of resourcefulness

later, he succeeded in reaching Europe. His older sister was sleeping with a renowned musician. Which brought its perks, apparently. She had a go at her lover to give her brother a job. Unfortunately, the latter was ill-suited to singing or handling a musical instrument. Finding himself in a tight spot, he begged the brother-in-law to take him along to try his luck in the north. Since he was going on tour, the brother-in-law brought the astrologer into his band, ostensibly as a saxophonist. A big black guy, dreadlocks, baritone saxophone slung over his shoulder, and a delicately expansive laugh to boot: the airport police didn't see anything out of place.

The astrologer sang and played djembe in a metro station. Singing and playing djembe is an overstatement. It was sickening. He sang grossly out of tune and chafed his palms from striking the instrument. Given that certain tender souls consider reason to be always Hellenic and emotion eternally Negro, or, more explicitly, that any black guy with dreadlocks is an excellent artiste, the passersby stopped, applauded, and chucked him some coins which allowed him to phone Africa and mend his spirit with the aid of wine costing one euro fifty centimes a bottle. It was very possible he'd been drunk when he barked down the phone. True he had lent Lucien a hundred dollars for his wedding to Jacqueline but that was not a valid reason to continue harassing someone. Moreover, Lucien had long since reimbursed him.

"Gents, I take my leave of you."

Requiem set to chewing the fat with one of the baby-chicks.

"Listen, Lucien, if you've got a bit of time to spare, produce a collection of poems on Mauritania too. It's publishable, is Mauritania. Oh, the Mauritanian imagination!"

He hunched over, wrote: "The girls are like the mines which are like the railroads which are like the diggers

which are like the students with their strike lacking timed longevity which are like their necktie-less pasts, an endangered species. But I admire the gaze with which they perceive life and death."

"Yes."

"Do you have the time?"

"Free verse on Mauritania."

"I'll see. Sir, I take my leave of you. The Diva and I will be performing together soon. We would welcome your presence."

"Love me forever."

"Take me to your country and love me more than your children."

The publisher raised his eyebrows!

"Stop trying to get in that kid's skirt."

He left with his pages of texts. On his heels, a stream of young ladies, but not all of them. The publisher stuck his hand in the air:

"Rum!"

Requiem, to the single-mamas who'd stayed put:

"Come!"

They headed toward the mixed restrooms.

They crossed the threshold. Mewing. Crescendo. Extended mewing. In the Diva's railroad crucible. Ephesians 18.

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27.

THE DEPARTURE OF THE NEGUS.

Requiem said he worked in the health sector, but there wasn’t a single living person in the City-State who knew what he was really involved in, outside of kidnappings and incursions in the Polygon. He always returned with a considerable sum of money that he spent all night counting and packing away in garbage bags. Sometimes he came back bleeding like a sponge. Sometimes he showed up virtually naked. And one night he even interrupted Lucien’s sleep:

“You know that I owe a Greek ship-owner $5,765,000 in two mornings’ time. What to do? He swears he’ll have my hide.”

But what the hell was Requiem up to with that kind of money? He’d never been seen in a three-piece suit, nor driving a carriage, nor straddling a mount, nor approaching the daughters of the thirty-odd consuls on which the whole burg, including our Mexican, South Ossetian, Pakistani, Belgian, French, Indochinese, Hungarian, Romanian, Chilean, Canadian, Ukrainian, and Tibetan brothers, most of them undocumented or holding a work permit illicitly obtained, had their eye.

Requiem eventually weighed anchor. He was incapable of living with an individual unable to land a job and who clung to his literature as to a family heirloom passed down

from generation to generation. He took his things away late one Monday night. It had been raining and windy all day. Following his latest choreography of misfortune, which lasted, as the Gods were his witnesses, around two hours, he had decided for the umpteenth time to demonstrate his Negus power.

“Evening, Requiem!”

Soaked through and through, Requiem found Lucien kicking back reading the latest gossip rags and refusing moreover to place his characters in a Colombian context.

Swansongs are eternal. Final choreography. Last installment. Without batting an eyelid, he handed Lucien a stack of newspapers, so wet they were crumbling away in his hands. He gave him a banknote. He kissed his forehead. He stared at him hard before taking the stairs down, his suitcases, his garbage bags, and his face that was going to the dogs like the station that was essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery …

“You leaving?”

“I don’t like the look of you. You won’t work for me even though you owe me everything. Furthermore, you insist on getting that thingamajig of yours published, and by whom? Malingeau, my all-time enemy! You won’t manage to pay the rent, I bet my dick on it!”

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28.

IN PRAISE OF A NIGHT OF TRANSGRESSION, FOLLOWED BY LUCIEN AND THE DIVA'S READING.

Not all nights had the same chronology of beer, music, dancing, single-mamas in the first flush of youth, dog kebabs, and madness. Those who went out at night knew the plot, the prosody of events, the convulsion of circumstances, the gloomy processions toward the unknown. Sometimes they began with the decrepit-single-mamas, followed up with poetical dancing on the paltry beds at Body-to-Body Granny's brothel — the Face-to-Face — continued with some jazz, prefaced with some mulled wine, sampled some cat and olive stew, boiled rice, and dog kebabs with saffron potatoes, smoked some Indian hemp, and raided the Polygon of Hope Mine armed to the teeth. Nights were a delight for those who knew how to make the most of them. True nights were long and popular. True nights were always eventful. True nights were no longer free from corruption and other low blows. True nights stank of neuralgia, the spit and traumas of those who built this broken beautiful world.

"It's during the night that the giants of this world manufacture our misfortunes with the zeal of self-taught bakers," laughed the girls with eggplant-breasts crammed into the mixed restrooms of Tram 83 with their desire to satisfy vast as the sea, to deal a second death, Gehenna,

Revelation 19, verse 20, Revelation 20, verse 14, Revelation 21, round about the eighth verse, or even the books of Corinthians. These girls were extraordinarily beautiful and they reprised the same psalms.

“We are warm and welcoming, inventive, flexible with our flesh that devises delights of other ages for you, and in this your wives are not even half the women we are, they’re too traditional, don’t know how to set their hips a-swaying, they’ve forgotten how to thrust with their left leg, and spend the night asking you for pocket money, university registration fees for the children, this and that, whereas us, we’re eternal, we proffer ourselves body and soul, just long enough to drive you, to drag you, to ecstasy.” Meanwhile the negotiations regarding rates always pushed upward, the legs giving way, the urge to be done with the pleasures of the underbelly, the beer that answers back, and the body bristling with nostalgia for dumping, soiling one’s pants (dump = transgress = expel = jettison = evacuate = download = release on bail = defecate = shit, and, not to sink into silliness or appear less crude, let us say crying need, or even transfer).

The for-profit tourists, the Chinese tourists, the second-class tourists, the young ladies of Avignon, the waitresses and the busgirls, the strikemongering students, the diggers, the suicidals, the mercenaries, the slim-jims, all of the City-State poured into the Tram.

The Diva and Lucien mounted the podium to the applause of the Tram. The writer was trembling. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the audience, or even communicate with the prima donna, who smiled to reassure them about their act.

The rumors that spread from the Cuba Club to the Polygon by way of Vampiretown recounted the detail of his abundant lovemaking with the diva after each concert. The busgirl with fat lips confirmed these below-the-belt doings. She became hysterical when refused a tip and, to regain

control of the situation, described at the top of her voice the way in which Lucien pumped the Diva. These revelations saddened every man who only had eyes for the fine body of the queen of these nights of boozing.

When Lucien showed up at the Tram, the mercenaries, the second-rate tourists, the slim-jims, the baby-chicks, and the diggers rushed over and begged him to spill the beans. He answered with silence. Not only did this heighten our curiosity but it made us extremely cross. We at least had the right to know the truth.

The Diva danced the same bolero. Upon hearing the question, she opened her arms and let rip a magnificent laugh. The most sensitive among us ejaculated in their pants. We spent the rest of the night picking over the prima donna's laugh until, weary of suppositions, we fell back on the baby-chicks.

The Diva is eternal. You don't forget her with one or even two baby-chicks. The next day, the desire to hump the opera singer returned, refueling the speculations and the gossip even more intensely. As a counterbalance, the diggers and the second-rate tourists therefore suggested holding a Miss Baby-Chick contest, since the first-rate tourists were threatening to quit coming to the Tram. The Diva is eternal. Even those who plotted against her are the same who covered the podium with flowers at each of her concerts.

"Where there's beer, there's cheer."

As a prelude, the Railroad Diva performed "This Life Is Longer Than The Train To Nowhere" over the crescendoing noise of boxcars newly acquired by the dissident General in return for some as yet undisclosed merchandise. The depth of the queen's voice paralyzed us, her delicate features in the half-light, a voice to plunge us into unbearable moods, to fill us with the impulse to run out and jump aboard the first train to nowhere, what depth, what timbre, her voice soared, pirouetted, descended, walked with the paralytics,

ripped the vile stench of the rails from the frozen-hearted, the tourists (arm in arm) swore to never recommence their dirty work, the baby-chicks wiped away sobs and tears as they told us they'd be back beneath their father's roof at dawn, the busgirls softened and gave us the fastest service in the world, Malingeau downed his ninth beer, the students buried their hatchet long as their strike, the miners bought bottles of beer for the desperados, everyone in tears, the mist, the sea crashed down, the darkness lifted from every face, the dog meat passed from table to table as in a depiction of the Last Supper, desires rose, certain tourists left their private conversations to shake hands with the diggers who whispered to them with teeth as dirty as the rails of the station whose metal structure … that a new world was coming, the Railroad Diva, beers were passed around, we trembled from head to toe, we dumped in our pants, we masturbated, we climbed on the tables, we banged our head against the walls, we gathered at the doors to the mixed facilities, that voice, that voice, that voice, it penetrated us, flayed us, trampled us, shredded us, voyage, birth, dream, we thought of those whom the earth had swallowed up, all those whom the trains had taken following a derailment, the bitterness and the eyes riveted on those who'd left to seek new lives across the ocean and who'd never got there betrayed by the waves, that voice, Requiem sniggered arrogantly, Lucien clung to his pen and scrawled joy is a violent dream and you need this violence in your dream to give it flavor, the publisher flung down his glasses, got up, walked back and forth across the Tram, that voice, that voice, that voice, joy is a diminished smile, we experienced a waltz of magic urges, dreams escaping in smoke wreaths from cigarettes, a voice that lacerates you, time had lost all purpose, we were in 2069 or 1735 or 926 or the Paleolithic era, filthy faces, bare feet, wearing loincloths, speaking unknown tongues, that voice, the tourists viewing their past, the diggers yelling that pride

would prevent them going to Beach Ngobila and diving into the ocean with vodka and rotten mangoes for provisions, forget your wounds in a chorus of acoustic rails, walk the length of your thoughts and, despite death and the trains that depart and return empty, speak of the cracks within, of joy, joy as a rusty jalopy that carries you to your grave mine where you enter with no hope of leaving, in the beginning was a diva and her freight-train voice, that voice, that voice, that voice, that voice, that voice, that voice, that voice, joined by fatwas, angelus bells, the droning of the boxcars on platform 13, that voice, that voice, the Diva, joy means drowning your tears, your failures, your languor in a little music that is simply human, that voice, that voice, that voice …

“Foreplay spoils the fun.”

Lucien began to read a text dealing with the fortuitous meeting between a man and a woman on board a train, common denominator: loss of memory. They fall in love. But how to tell each other this? How to love each other? How to talk of their previous life? Toward the end, while the man tried to fashion a language to say love with the five words he had left (history, tonsillitis, truce, shame, and weld), the Diva, who was playing the role of the woman, against a background of prerecorded sounds, unreeled a song, long and mournful, mournful, mournful,

mournful, and at the same time celestial with her voice, bursts of applause and applause and applause …

Within and without the Tram, a convulsion of incompleteness. Within and without the Tram, cries and yelling. Within and without the Tram, the songs and texts of the sacred couple, united by the same momentum, time’s wasting, the thirst for archeology, solitude.

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29.

FROM DUST YOU WERE TAKEN, TO DUST YOU SHALL RETURN, GENESIS 3:19.

Lucien didn’t dig in the mines like ordinary mortals. He preferred to live off his pen or maybe work in a large office all to himself. That was impossible in a jungle like the City-State. All activity revolved around the stone. Everyone depended on it directly or indirectly. We didn’t know what the hell else to do except head underground, moles that we were, that we are, that we shall remain. You don’t mess with your destiny, the Negus liked to say. It is written: born in the mines and the trains, you shall spend your whole existence swarming about the quarries until the prophecies come to pass. Poverty is hereditary just like power, stupidity, and hemorrhoids. It’s even contagious, this locomotive life.

Unable to pay his rent, he decided to contact Émilienne:

“Come over, don’t fret, you should have said ages ago that Requiem was making life so difficult for you! Ask anyone to show you the way to The Guerilla, a little bar-restaurant-cinema a few blocks from the station. They call me Aunty Émilienne.”

Had Émilienne really meant it when she’d told him to call her if he was ever in difficulty? She’d exerted all the pressure she could to get him released. She loved him, showered him with her affection, even reproached him for

abiding forever in his shell when she only required a little attention in return.

The Guerilla was a little house, its walls pitted by bullets, relics of the third — sorry, fourth — war of liberation.

Diggers, inside and out, hobo style, dirty, disdainful, laughing like crazy, with their smokes, their picks, their shovels, their spite, and their way of belittling you as if you weren't made of the same flesh. A standing parliament of post-adolescent baby-chicks roaring with laughter.

"Do you have the time?"

Musicians with their guitars, acrobats, tourists, cooks, waitresses, busgirls, students, you'd have thought it was Tram 83 in miniature.

"I'm happy you came."

"Do you have the time?"

"Foreplay is exhausting."

She helped him carry his suitcase, steered him toward the counter near to which a table was waiting just for him.

Lucien, egoist, there you are focused on your belly, without even bothering to check if Jacqueline is able to survive, what with all these crashing stock markets that are hitting the headlines.

"Are you well, darling?"

"Yes," he replied, with an intellectual's arrogance.

A fresh band took their places.

A tourist, perhaps the group's sponsor, introduced them. Two talented guitarists. A saxophonist in his fifties. A drummer, and proud of it, with dreadlocks, piercings, tattoos, and a booming laugh. Attacking-vocals: two lead singers, four backing singers. The dancers were five baby-chicks, well fleshy, their midriffs exposed. An *atalaku*, or shall we say a shock-emcee. And the bandleader, the high priest, spiffed-up Kasamoto style. They dominated, bewitched, possessed the place, you could feel it. Zairians no doubt, given the zeal with which they beguiled the

audience, their dexterity, the way they looked at people, their shouts, their singing, their liveliness. They kicked off the show with two fine rumbas from the 1960s. Followed up with their own repertoire, a contemporary repertoire seasoned with some Coupé-Décalé, revised and corrected, the new *kotazo* dance, also known as the dance of the *mpomba* (meaning strong men, Kinshasa bandits who'll slit your throat at the drop of a hat) accompanied by a type of *ndombolo* called *lopele* (fishtail), throwing some merengue and conga steps into the blend, occasionally summoning to the rescue a remixed *kotazo* called *kotazo 2* — a question of universality no doubt. You can imagine the effect triggered by good music, good dancing, fit guys, great girls, an audience switched-on and captivated 100% — but Lucien (Tintin in Zimbabwe) went on writing his crap as if nothing was happening!

After close to an hour of balladry, a different music began to pound out, right across from The Guerilla. It was, apparently, a different band, different Zairians apparently, who knew full well that their brothers across the way were performing a concert but who, for the sake of provocation, perhaps to prove they were capable of doing the same, began playing good music too. They opened the hostilities with "Débarquement," lead single off King Kester Emeneya's album *Le Jour le plus long*. In the background the "pigeon pigeon" dance that was, we learned, a massive hit in Central Africa, particularly the Belgian Congo. The diggers who had previously fought in Zaire, Rwanda, Uganda, and Angola in the ranks of Jonas Savimbi and who knew all these songs and dance steps by heart, prattled on about how they weren't at all surprised that the competition took on such proportions. Same music, same dancing, same vocals, same get-up, same midriffs, same nationality, face to face, body to body.

To a tourist who still didn't manage to grasp the ins and outs of this rivalry, they gave this example: "It's like Bruce

Springsteen giving a concert a stone's throw from Johnny Hallyday who's playing another concert but haughtily, not forgetting that Beyoncé, Foo Fighters, Depeche Mode, Manu Chao, Paul Simon, and so on are all playing concerts in the vicinity, and the town turns into a music stand." In fact, different sorts of music were blasting out in the distance, same shouts, same solos, same instruments, same dances, same midriffs.

"You own all this!"

She nodded her head.

"You didn't tell me you were so rich and powerful."

Remark with no basis whatsoever. Lucien knew that she stepped out with tourists who excavated, so couldn't he have thought about the matter a little more? Everyone knew that in order to attain a certain legality, to excavate without drawing the wrath of the Dissidence, or to pander to public opinion, certain tourists married and stepped out with an "indigenous" whom they cherished accordingly in due form.

She gave no answer. She simply set about haranguing her troops, her waitresses, and busgirls who were slowing in their service of the successions of bottles.

Those girls are the same everywhere, he thought, authoritarian, stubborn as mules, notoriously insubordinate through and through, with their fat lips. As proof, out the corner of his eye he saw them scrutinizing him and collapsing into fits of hysterical laughter and other unprecedented inanities.

"Do you have the time?"

"I've got a cheeky side, fun yet perverse, you interested?"

"I'm inexhaustible and capable of every position."

"I know every page of the Kama Sutra."

The poesies and litanies of a few post-baby-chicks with hair like wooded savannah come to seek their fortune.

"You're handsome, I feel like warming you up."

“I’ve got a silicone bust.”

“Your mouth is like the Eiffel Tower’s gaze.”

“I dream of Venice, take me far away from here.”

They left The Guerilla at one in the morning, direction: home.

“You can stay at mine, if you like.”

“Do you live with anyone?”

“No, it’s you I’m interested in. Aren’t you thinking of living with me?”

“I don’t know.”

They arrived at the house and Lucien refused to share her room. So he accepted, without objection, to spend his nights on a mattress in the little kitchen overrun by cockroaches.

There are people who don’t know how to make the most of their existence. A woman is absolutely sure you’re the man of her dreams, she follows you, whispers words of love to you, showers you with affection, yet you refuse to respond to her advances, as if you were the handsomest man in the world when you’re nothing more than a brat. You prefer cockroaches to Émilienne’s stunning body. Requiem wasn’t wrong when he stated with considerable humanism that certain people live with a brain dating from the 13th century.

Similarly, you show up in the City-State buck naked. The General calls and makes you a deal: “Write your texts in my honor and I will guarantee both your financial and your material comfort.” And you retort: “I don’t give in to blackmail, I am a writer, not a griot in the service of the king.” What a way of thinking!

Same thing in the Back-Country: you’re in quite some difficulty, you’re being threatened morning till night, you’re on the verge of beggary. “Compose your patriotic poetries, and we’ll let you lead a quiet life. We’ll give you a position at the university and a host of other privileges.” But you throw it back in their faces. You could be lucky enough to

possess beautiful bodies, beautiful women, apartments in Europe, but you throw it back in their faces. Life is yours for the taking, and you throw it back in their faces.

Complete pandemonium ensued when he set foot in The Guerilla. The waitresses and busgirls dashed in all directions. He was received with great fanfare by the baby-chicks, waitresses, busgirls, and a handful of digger-students desperate for leadership. Émilienne had already seen to it that their liaison was public knowledge, that he was the man of her dreams.

Russian cigarettes, red wine, two plates of goat kebabs followed by grilled fish with spinach. The musicians, prancing to the beat of a rumba, yelled *mabangas*, shout-outs, far and wide: “Great Oilman, Boss of Bosses, Man of His Time, Papa Love, Man On The Ball.” Everyone thought that the place was his and that Émilienne was simply some chick he’d picked up. A logic reinforced by the strong rumors in this direction that were flying around. He ate sulkily and spent the whole evening daydreaming, as unmoved by the choreographies of the musicians from the Belgian Congo as he was by the kind attentions of the busgirls. He wrote: “They enjoy themselves and extend the probability of their descent into hell, which will be preceded by some small glory, once their pleasures have bled them dry.”

At two in the morning, Émilienne gave instructions to the young woman who stood in for her whenever she went home to get some rest.

“Come on, Lucien.”

They left to the applause of the waitresses and musicians who no doubt wished to earn a little credit.

They walked down Market Street.

“They take me for your husband. I really don’t like that at all.”

Lucien, Lucien, Lucien, why these Tintin-in-Sudan machinations?

“I mean really …”

“Tell them I’m not your fella.”

“I mean really …”

“I don’t know what to say to their chitter-chatter.”

“I mean really …”

“You know …”

“I mean really …”

But Émilienne wouldn’t let it go, hoping he’d change his mind.

“Listen, Lucien, can you walk me to 12 rue des Eucalyptus?”

“What for?”

“I’ve got another business there and it’s been over a week, she hasn’t come to tell me what’s what, the woman who works for me. I try to get hold of her, the phone just rings and rings.”

Lucien, proudly:

“See you back home, you know the way, don’t you?”

“Please …”

They turned onto a dark, narrow street. Émilienne feigned a stumble. He leapt forward but the girl spun round and pressed her lips to those of our friend, the writer.

“You crazy or what!”

He pushed her away.

“I didn’t mean to do it. And what if I did?”

12 rue des Eucalyptus.

Young girls barely twelve years old out front of a house painted in the colors of the municipality — blue, red, green, and orange — shrieked and scampered back into the yard.

“What are you doing out here?” cried Émilienne, almost in tears.

They hurried inside. And came face-to-face with a woman dressed all in burgundy. She shrieked too, then pulled herself together:

“Good evening, Madame.”

“Why do you no longer come see me? Why aren’t the girls in their rooms?”

“I’ve been a little sick, but I was just telling myself I’d come tell you how things are.”

“Wait for me here,” she said to the playwright.

Lucien stood there amid the chaos, while the two women rushed off down the corridors.

“Where are the girls?”

“Why?”

“I want to see all the girls.”

The lady in burgundy called out to the girls, who came running with much bowing and scraping and proffering of apologies . Lucien entered the premises. An oval room. Eight doors. Émilienne and the burgundy lady on a long greenish-blue sofa, opposite nearly naked girls stuffed into colorful yet skimpy outfits and other get-ups peculiar to the activities of a bawdyhouse.

After close to two hours of confabulation, they went on their way again. But before they raised anchor, the baby-chicks, who thought that Lucien was a client and who wanted to prove to Émilienne that they knew how to lay the ground, came running with their long, slow smiles somewhere between furtive yet amorous wink and nonchalant pout—doubtless to give free rein to their bodies stimulated by the experience of their profession. For the first time since his arrival in the City-State, he felt a desire to stretch his body over one of these gems, but hastily stood up and left.

Lucien took himself a bit too seriously. Life is short and you need to know how to live it to the full. Is it a crime to nick a miner-prospector-tourist’s wallet? Where’s the harm in stealing a tourist’s dog and eating it for the family meal, with onions and red wine attached? It won’t be the end of the world, the dog or the wallet, given that he excavates at a rate of maybe three thousand tons of copper a day. Three thousand tons of copper for his Doberman that you recycle

because you are hungry and he’s got everything: money, women, and prestige. Three thousand tons of copper or cobalt for five hundred dollars. Fleecing a tourist who’s excavating is an act of self-defense, a practice handed down from father to son in both the Back-Country and the labyrinthine mines of the City-State. But Lucien will tell you: “It’s wrong, my conscience reproaches me for it.” The gall.

“Why do you do that, Émilienne?”

“I don’t understand.”

“What’s got into you to colonize these young girls? Don’t you think they deserve better than to be sold for a pittance?”

“What?”

“They’re minors. Elsewhere, you’d go to prison.”

Angered by these statistics, Émilienne lost her temper.

“You got any work to give them?”

“These girls are still kids.”

“Age is not a factor! Even the dissident General knows this.”

“Listen …”

“I defy anyone to prove me wrong!”

“You’re mistaken.”

She took advantage of the occasion to thumb her nose at all Lucien’s singular theories, even calling him impotent.

They arrived at her place at four in the morning. Lucien went into the kitchen and packed his bags, or rather his imitation-leather satchel and his computer.

“I have nothing against you but I think I need to leave for the sake of my conscience.”

“Where to?”

Lucien’s mannerisms grated. Someone retrieves you like a garbage bag and you want to spoil the party for a question of conscience! What the hell is your conscience doing in a story that you don’t need to be a writer to understand? You’re nothing and you want to act like a big

shot. What ingratitude! A guy shows up at a woman's place and she gives him food, drink, clothing, and pocket money, but he gets up one fine morning with a question of conscience! To cap it all, you still want to pass yourself off as a whipping boy.

"Listen, Lucien, I'm sorry about before. I lost my temper. Listen."

"No. I don't want to live off dirty money."

She even begged him.

"I'm so sorry."

"I can't live off the bodies of those little girls!"

Lucien, what a clown! If you don't want to live off the bodies of those little girls then earn money yourself, stand on your own two feet, go rescue all the decrepit-single-mamas on earth, build schools for former-baby-chicks, start an NGO, find them work.

"I'm sorry."

"You should have told me."

Lucien, what you forget is that she has always loved you and that she has suffered for you. It's annoying to come across individuals like that, with no conscience, ungrateful to the bone. She knelt, weeping, in front of the door to prevent him leaving, but he made it all the same, shoving her out the way.

He left behind him the clothes, the phone, the money — in short, everything she'd given him.

Why do you keep trying to exceed the limit of tolerability? What kind of man are you? Is the reality of life not sufficient for your conscience? Must you deprive yourself of the pleasures of the underbelly to be a writer? What idiocy to want to pass yourself off as a hero? Ultimately, what exactly is the conscience of a writer who won't open his eyes?

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30.

THE RETURN OF THE ANIMAL-MAN.

Malingeau hadn’t been seen at the Tram for several months. Gossip started by the waitresses and the busgirls, propagated by the single-mama-post-baby-chicks, and then relayed by the secondhand tourists, circulated throughout the City-State: he was suffering from an incurable disease. Some baby-chicks even maintained that he’d been flown home to Switzerland in critical condition. Requiem couldn’t help ordering rounds for the entire Tram. For the Negus, one thing was sure: Malingeau was no longer of this world. Every evening at the Tram he demonstrated, like a proper parrot, the extent to which this demise was a relief not only for the whole Tram but also for the whole City-State. As soon as he showed up, he took Malingeau’s table and imitated him to the letter. This caused hilarity among the head baby-chicks and the secondhand tourists.

Good things never last, so they say. One Saturday like any other, around 5 P.M., a rumor began to spread along Peace Boulevard, Constitution Street, and Stanley Road, before spilling into the Tram: Ferdinand Malingeau was very much alive, and had left Geneva, crossed the border of the City-State this morning, and would surely come to Tram 83 this evening.

It was a custom among the for-profit tourists that whenever they returned from their own countries, they

would buy five or six rounds for everyone in the course of the night. Which drove even the craziest who hung out on the Main Square to venture into Tram 83.

As the sun sank ever lower, the rumors grew and took the shape of truth. Firstly through the machinations of the for-profit tourists. It was a whole ritual. Upon the return of one of their own from a long trip, they took themselves along to Tram 83 from 5 P.M. to welcome them, bearing orchids, elegantly turned-out, well dressed, well groomed, and well perfumed like Papa Wemba the year he recorded *Viva la Musica*. They came with their wives and their children. They sponsored the music of the day, meaning that which suited their taste. They gave the Tram's owner a pot of cash so that an improvised band, composed almost exclusively of for-profit tourists, could play for the occasion. Songs from their own countries, sometimes even into the small hours. It was a beautiful thing to be involved in such concerts. Each tourist could request a song of their choice and the band would play it there and then. The European tourists would cry on these occasions. They requested songs that reminded them of their youth, that time forever lost. And the usual nostalgia that arises whenever one finds oneself an exile hit them full in the face.

To avoid an unnecessary crush, the Tram's owner would choose the evening's participants on the fly. Everyone agreed on the quota. It was conceived in such a way that all social strata of the City-State would be represented. For example, they might take ten baby-chicks, ten-post-baby-chicks, ten students, ten mercenaries, ten diggers, ten Chinese tourists, and, finally, ten slim-jims. The remaining seats were reserved for the direct beneficiaries, the for-profit tourists and their families. That was another thing about Tram 83. You could arrange an evening and handpick the guests of your choice. You simply had to fork out the required pot of cash and kick everyone out, including the for-profit tourists, unless the latter bought out the same

evening with a larger pot of cash than your own. But for lowly folk like us, booking the Tram for an evening was beyond our means. We couldn't allow ourselves such eccentricities.

Around the 1930s, an enormously wealthy tourist liked to hand over the pot of cash and entertain just five or six of his friends. Today's tourists are kinder in this regard. Just imagine, the whole of Tram 83 outside simply because an individual and his buddies want to drink their beer in comfort. Not knowing what the hell to do with themselves, the Tram regulars would hang around eating dog kebabs, or leave to go finish the night at the Cuba Club, known for its fifty-four types of salsa. You arrive, and the waitresses or busgirls hand you two menu cards, one for the grub and another for the salsa.

It is highly possible that nobody went off to work that evening. Even the mercenaries forsook the mines to gratify us with their presence. Who could miss such an event? Everyone flocked to the Tram, on foot, by bicycle, on motorbikes, or in beat-up cars. The crowd stretched as far as the station whose unfinished metal structure …

8:15. 10:30. 11:15. Malingeau still hadn't showed his face. He turned up around three in the morning. The Diva welcomed him with a song crooned partially in Armenian. Applause followed applause. Lucien went unnoticed in the crush created by the arrival of the Tram's new darling and the mass of bodyguards.

"Foreplay is for tourists. We like to eat straightaway."

Dressed all in white, Malingeau mounted the podium erected in his honor and greeted the assembled company in an African language. Ten minutes of applause, interspersed with hearty shouts of "Ferdinand Malingeau! Ferdinand Malingeau!"

His first words:

"This is the most beautiful day of my life. I really must thank you for your support and for all the love you have

shown me. I am happy to be back home with you, to share our everyday existence, for better and for worse."

Applause, followed by yells of "Ferdinand Malingeau! Ferdinand Malingeau!"

"My news is that I have just published the stage-tale."

The crowd had long since tossed Lucien onto the garbage heap of history. Nobody remembered his reading that had turned sour. They initially thought that the work in question dealt with the mines and carried Malingeau's signature.

"… remarkable text, half history, literature in every sense, penned by a local author, I mean Lucien."

Endless applause, hearty shouts of "Lucien, the writer! Lucien, the writer!"

When they celebrated an event like this, the for-profit tourists took the opportunity to attract the favor of the City-State and settle scores with their opponents by ricochet.

"Do you have the time?"

"I have learned of the announcement of my death and that some of you rejoiced at this! To those people, I say that I will die aged ninety!"

Applause.

"I address a special message to one Requiem. He has made threats against my person, called me every monkey name under the sun, moved heaven and earth to stop the book appearing."

The crowd became increasingly worked up.

"The text was printed in Switzerland, the French-speaking part, and for those who are not familiar with this country, we'll be holding geography classes right here at the Tram."

As he held forth, students unloaded large crates of books from a truck. The baby-chicks took charge of handing out copies, while offering their private services.

"This Requiem, I put a roof over his head, I hired him for my firm, I gave him food and drink. But in return, a

nightmare. He spent his entire existence badmouthing me like I was a foreigner, like I wasn't of this land. If I am not African, what am I then? Did the first man not appear in Africa? Was he not my ancestor, too?"

Burst of applause. Some tourists even began to cry.

"I'm going to let you in on a secret. This Requiem ensnared me through a young woman, as he has many among us. Knowing this bastard as I do, tomorrow or the day after he will publish the pictures this youngster took while I slept. I ask you please, as soon as he dares distribute this filthy rag, take it and tear it up in front of him."

The crowd hurled fatwas against the Negus. The crowd promised Malingeau they would take care of this villain Requiem personally. The publisher pursued his indictment, almost barking.

"Show yourself, Requiem, if you're a real man! Get up on this podium, Requiem, if you've got any balls! You're pathetic, Requiem! I have beaten you, I have beaten you!"

Requiem didn't know where to turn. He couldn't hold out very long, what with Malingeau talking like the radio, without pause. He raised his voice in the direction of the publisher. The waitresses and the busgirls felt cheated and began to manhandle him. He lashed out at the busgirl with the fat lips. A bunch of diggers surrounded him, dragged him by the collar all the way to the station whose metal structure … and there, some jazz musicians who were mooching about forced him to urinate in his shoes and empty the liquid into his mouth.

He'd not felt this battered and bruised for several years. He made his way painfully back home, locked himself in and wept for a long while. For a person of his status, proud and conceited ever since his first raid on Hope Mine, and revered by all of the City-State, Malingeau's triumphal return marked the end of a legend. The whole Tram, or

rather the whole of the City-State, knew that the Negus was Malingeau's bête noire.

Malingeau asked the writer to join him on the podium. The baby-chicks didn't hesitate to vaunt their bodies despite the nature of the event.

"Do you have the time?"

"I've got Brazilian buttocks."

"Take me to Kiev and let's make love in full sunlight!"

The atmosphere heightened, heightened, heightened …

"I don't want to hog the microphone. We will hold a launch party to present the book and its author. But now, time for beer and music. Drink till dawn! It's Malingeau picking up the check!"

There was uproar, preceded by a low, booming yell. The baby-chicks, only half-understanding, cried their eyes out. The diggers, the students, the second-rate tourists, the for-profit tourists, the mercenaries, the slim-jims, everybody, exchanged embraces beneath the frenzied rumba of the Zairian musicians.

Lucien left the Tram just after the publisher's speech. He wanted to shake off the baby-chicks who were hounding him. For the first time in his life he phoned the Clignancourt guy to tell him his book was coming out. As usual, the Paris friend didn't let him get a word in edgeways: "I found a job that pays more than I could have hoped. So I can't waste a second dealing with your texts. What's more, African literature as such is not exotic anymore. Please, Lucien, if you phone me again, let's talk of other things, the Kama Sutra, music, beer, but definitely not literature. We're in the 21st century and you want to live a writer's life, Lucien!"

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31.

SHOULD TRAM 83 BE RAZED TO THE GROUND?

Malingeau sent Requiem a signed copy of the book, just to defy him. The Negus had felt humiliated and betrayed to the quick. His whole gang, even Mortal Combat, nicknamed Loyal of the Loyal, had eaten and drunk Brazza Beer to the glory of Lucien and Ferdinand Malingeau. The Negus didn't show his face for over a fortnight. He forsook the mines and Tram 83. Spent his days cloistered at a baby-chick's.

"If you take me to your country, I'll love you more than myself."

There are some people you shouldn't joke with. Requiem was one of them. Not appearing in public places indicated a strategy. He was waiting for life to move on, for the City-State—having reverted to its everyday rhythm of blackouts and cave-ins of underground quarries, of spats between busgirls and baby-chicks who were born yesterday, students and mineworkers, second-rate tourists and for-profit tourists—to forget the Malingeau phenomenon.

Two months later, when he had been comprehensively expunged from the collective memory, Requiem turned up at Tram 83. He had not chosen the date of his reappearance by chance. The dissident General was attending a peace conference in Johannesburg hosted by the South African government. The national soccer team was playing a match against Cameroon. Which meant that

a horde of people had flocked to the Tram to watch the broadcast of the sports fixture on a big screen.

Requiem had even slimmed down. Malingeau laughed conspicuously. Tram 83 behaved as if it had never known the Negus. Which is serious when you know that the Tram had only survived the crash of ’92 thanks to the Negus, who had lent its owner some money.

Right after the match, Requiem asked to speak. He was urged to say his piece quickly. The national team had won the game. The Chinese tourists ordered rounds for the whole of Tram 83 with a view to combining business with pleasure.

“Foreplay irritates me. It’s just time chucked out the window.”

Requiem muttered a short sentence:

“I would like to distribute this magazine to anyone who wants it.”

The whole Tram as one:

“Clear off.”

The Chinese tourists:

“We can give you something to eat if it’s hunger that’s made you lose your head.”

The young ladies of Avignon:

“That man, he’ll never understand!”

The busgirl with the fat lips in her colonial-infantry patter:

“You, go home, sleep.”

With considerable nonchalance, he handed the magazine to the honey doing her makeup just to his left. She opened it, leafed through the ten pages of the magazine, most of which were covered with photographs of tourists, and screamed as if stung by a bee:

“The General!”

The whole Tram, with the exception of the for-profit tourists, rushed the podium, a contorted mass, arms outstretched like the possessed in a deliverance session.

Requiem began to hurl copies of the magazine into the crowd. He wasn’t even able to complete his task. He was violently shoved, squashed by the crowd trying desperately to swag the loot. Taking advantage of the ruckus, everyone wanting to leave, everyone wanting to enter the Tram, he crawled all the way to the bar, where the publisher abided — flabbergasted by the turn of events — and stuck a knife in his leg.

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32.

A MAN’S CREDIBILITY DEPENDS ON THE POWER OF HIS UNDERBELLY.

Upon his return, the dissident General flew into a terrible rage. Lucien had had a dig at him in his stage-tale. In the final scene, entitled “Taking of the Citadel,” the character of the dissident General met his death after Lumumba had given him a sound thrashing. The words that concluded the book

an empty-body
a thingy-body
a trashy-body
a doggy-body
the headless-body
of a farmyard General
lying in the sludge
in a state of advanced deterioration!

were on everyone’s lips. The baby-chicks even used it to accost potential clients, the waitresses and busgirls to demand their tip, the diggers to taunt the students, and the jazz musicians to warm up the Tram.

The two nude photographs of him published by the Negus had sent him into a state of apoplexy. According to

the busgirl with the fat lips, he broke off diplomatic relations with Bolivia, Uganda, and Azerbaijan that very day, and shot at his bodyguards with live rounds. All conversations in the Tram were no longer about the General's slender body, his bamboo-like frame, but his tiny pecker.

"Do you have the time?"

The inhabitants of the City-State had seized the opportunity to make fun of him. The mob hissed fortuitous comparisons between his penis and a matchstick. At the Tram, several nights had been spent debating how a man with no penis, or rather with such a tiny tool, could get a baby-chick going.

The strong man of the City-State, known for his interminable speeches, delivered the shortest oration in the world.

"I am closing all the mines in the City-State until further notice, and I have given orders for Tram 83, this hotspot of criminality, debauchery, and perversity, to be demolished this very afternoon."

It was incredible what was happening. What would the City-State be like without Tram 83? Demolishing Tram 83 was like razing the Eiffel Tower or Rio's Christ the Redeemer, decapitating the memory of the City-State, depriving an entire people of their leisure. The Tram embodied national unity and cohesion, despite the deep-rooted subdivisions. No one in the City-State, except Lucien, could stand to go a week without dropping into Tram 83. Even the patients packed into Saint Giles Hospital had excursions to the Tram arranged for them. The dissident General was going mad. Demolishing the Tram spelled unemployment not only for the waitresses and busgirls (including the one with the fat lips and dutiful-Negro patter), but all the young ladies of Avignon too.

As soon as the announcement of the Tram's destruction was heard, the inhabitants of the City-State headed for

Tram 83. For several reasons, of course: some — “Do you have the time?” — to lure potential clients, others to protest against the prohibition on excavating, still others to block the imminent destruction of Tram 83, for the Tram was the only thing that really belonged to them.

“Foreplay is all the fashion. We demand it too.”

There was a dissidence within the Dissidence. A hundred mercenaries broke away from their leader and switched camps with arms and ammunition. For two months, the baby-chicks, the musicians, the dandy *sapeurs*, the suicidals, the diggers, the tourists of all nationalities combined — in short, the whole of the City-State — ate, drank, pissed, idled, and shat in Tram 83 and its vicinity. The dissident General at the head of his rebellion failed on three occasions to take Tram 83.

Misfortunes always succeed each other closely. The owner of the Tram died following a long illness. The baby-chicks contended that the dissident General was undoubtedly a sorcerer and that he had eaten him in the spirit world. Which stoked the animosity against him and his militia and strengthened the links between the tribes clinging to their Tram.

“You’re handsome like in a porn film. Come to my arms, beloved tourist.”

Hissing that they’d swiped from him the power that was already eroding because of the many defections among his troops, the dissident General lifted the prohibition on the mines. But who could get away with excavating except a few for-profit tourists, thirsty for sex and easy money? The mines interested nobody for nearly two months.

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33.

THE THREE KINGS.

The dissident General had not recovered from the photographs and all the idiocies put about regarding his skinny matchstick wiener, his vile death in Lucien's theater piece, and, above all, his assaults repulsed with such vigor during the siege of Tram 83. He gave a 2½ hour speech, at the end of which he put a price on the heads of Lucien, Malingeau, and also Requiem. "I want you to bring me these three bastards, dead or alive! Fifty thousand dollars and the authorization to excavate for life in the Polygon of Hope Mine."

Malingeau, who feared being sold out by his own, obtained, not without some difficulty, the right of asylum in the official residence of the Chinese tourists. Requiem narrowly escaped an ambush set by Mortal Combat. An idea occurred to him, and he too took refuge with these same tourists. Disguised as a woman, on Christelle's advice, Lucien also managed to earn the protection of the Chinese tourists.

The gossip surrounding the General's penis continued apace. He began to increase the reward money. As the sum grew, the attitude of the Chinese tourists started to change. They were no longer kind and obliging vis-à-vis the three fugitives. "You know," they repeated, "our business is floundering, but if we could truly gain the favor of the

dissident General … The dissident General is now offering seventy thousand dollars, while we only need twenty thousand dollars to save our firm from bankruptcy.”

As soon as they learned that the trio had found refuge in Beijing, the Chinatown of the City-State, the second-rate tourists, the mercenaries, the baby-chicks, the for-profit tourists, the diggers, the Congolese musicians, the waitresses, the busgirls, including the busgirl with the fat lips — basically, everyone — contacted the Chinese tourists to get them to hand over the three bastards and for the money to be distributed equally. Christmas was coming and everybody was preoccupied with acquiring some red wine and the wherewithal to buy their dog kebabs.

“Take me to your country and I’ll give you all the love in the world.”

On the 24th of December, Requiem, Lucien, and Malingeau took advantage of their hosts being otherwise distracted to vanish into thin air. They had but one thought: get to the station whose metal structure … then climb aboard the first train for the Back-Country.

Requiem, walking ahead of them, was more than aggravated. He insulted everyone: the baby-chicks, the second-rate tourists, the Diva, the for-profit tourists, Christelle, Jacqueline, the waitresses, the busgirls, the busgirl with the fat lips, the mercenaries, Lucien, the publisher, the dissident General, Mortal Combat …

Malingeau reacted forcefully to the Negus’s barking: “Don’t speak to me in that tone! I was born in Geneva, Requiem. I was born in Geneva, you know!”

Lucien meanwhile, hanging back, stopped to write despite the characteristic congestion of this station whose metal structure …

All paths lead to Tram 83. No roads lead to the Northern Station without passing in front of the place. They felt some nostalgia as they walked past the Tram. The ambience was at its peak. Outside, people sat, stood, drank, ate, sang as

one voice renditions of the Diva, danced, yelled, kissed, enticed the clients, hailed the baby-chicks, cursed, brawled, and demanded jazz in order to be on the same footing as the first-rate tourists.

“Do you have the time?”

When they began to cross the rails, stepping from one to the next, the music reached them, a delicious conversation between saxophone, drums, and trumpet. The saxophone rose, rose, rose, then faded into blissful silence. The drums then filled the empty space before petering out. Sax and drums then climbed together, before the drums broke off, giving free rein to the sax, which soliloquized like a dying dog. The saxophone passed away in turn with an almost cerebral hiccup. It was at this precise moment that the trumpet made its entrance, covering a tune known throughout the City-State. The saxophone then ascended from its ashes and set to nibbling away at the space conquered by the trumpet. In two beats, the drums joined this predators’ ball, which echoed through the station with its unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that called to mind the railroad built by Stanley, cassava fields, cut-rate hotels, greasy spoons, bordellos, Pentecostal churches, bakeries, and noise engineered by men of all generations and nationalities combined.

FISTON MWANZA MUJILA was born in 1981 in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo, where he went to a Catholic school before studying Literature and Human Sciences at Lubumbashi University. He now lives in Graz, Austria, and is pursuing a PhD in Romance Languages. His writing has been awarded with numerous prizes, including the Gold Medal at the 6th Jeux de la Francophonie in Beirut as well as the Best Text for Theater (“Preis für das beste Stück,” State Theater, Mainz) in 2010.

His poems, prose works, and plays are reactions to the political turbulence that has come in the wake of the independence of the Congo and its effect on day-to-day life. As he describes in one of his poems, his texts describe a "geography of hunger": hunger for peace, freedom, and bread. *Tram 83*, written in French and published in August 2014 as a lead title of the *rentrée littéraire* by Éditions Métailié, is his first novel. It has been shortlisted and won numerous literary prizes in France, Austria, England, and the United States.

ROLAND GLASSER translates literary and genre fiction from French, as well as art, travel, and assorted nonfiction. He studied theater, cinema, and art history in the UK and France, and has worked extensively in the performing arts, chiefly as a lighting designer. He is a French Voices and PEN Translates award winner and serves on the Committee of the UK Translators Association. Having lived in Paris for many years, he is currently based in London.

Roland Glasser would like to thank Looren Translation House for their provision of a residency (www.looren.net).

ALAIN MABANCKOU is a Franco-Congolese author and Professor of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA. His novels include *Blue White Red* (1998), *African Psycho* (2003), *Broken Glass* (2005), *Memoirs of a Porcupine* (2006), *Black Bazaar* (2009), and *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* (2013). He is the recipient of numerous literary prizes, such as the *Grand Prix littéraire de l'Afrique noire*, *Prix Renaudot*, *Prix Georges Brassens*, and the *Grand Prix de Littérature Henri Gal* from the Académie Française for his life's work. He was short-listed for the Man Booker Prize International in 2015.

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